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Designation, Stagnation, and Representation: A Qualitative Exploration of the Self-Perception of Power Among NCAA Division I Senior Woman Administrators

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Designation, Stagnation, and Representation: A Qualitative Exploration of the Self-Perception of Power Among NCAA Division I Senior Woman Administrators

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite significant growth and advancement for women and girls participating in sports, we have not seen the same trend for women in leadership roles in athletics – even with the introduction of the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) designation. The SWA designation was implemented in 1989 to ensure that at least one woman would be involved with the leadership of athletic departments following the NCAA's takeover of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1981. Confusion and misperceptions have surrounded the role, and, as a result, impacted the women who serve in it. This study's phenomenological design aimed to gain insight to the experiences and self-perception of power of the women who serve as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions. Through semi-guided interviews with women currently serving as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions, this study provides an in-depth look at the representation, inconsistency, and self-perceived power that women in this role experience.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Women in college sports have long been a topic of research in higher education, specifically those serving in positions of power (Peachey & Burton, 2011; Plyley, 1997; Whisenant et al., 2002). Their leadership and communication styles have been examined extensively, often aiming to identify key differences between them and their male counterparts (Welty Peachey & Burton, 2011; Whisenant et al., 2002). Authors often point to these differences in leadership style as a possible explanation for the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within athletics.

The passage of equity laws like Title IX, which aimed to increase opportunities for women, have actually had reverse effects on those opportunities in some cases. The bill states "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, 1972). One example of Title IX's unintended effects is that "prior to 1972 [and the passage of the bill] women held 90% of the coaching jobs for women's teams, and now they hold only 40.8%" (Elsesser, 2019, para. 9). Despite the fact that the ratio of male student-athletes to female student-athletes is nearly one to one (Schwarb, 2018), a recent *New York Times* article exposed a notable gender gap in Division I college athletics: "of the 65 colleges in the nation's five wealthiest and most powerful sports conferences, only four have women leading the athletic department" (Blinder, 2019, para. 4).

These data help to shed some light on the continued gender disparity in leadership positions at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institutions. After the passage of Title IX, the NCAA took note of some of these disparities and created the role of Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) in an effort to help "athletic programs to establish a minimum number of women serving within governance bodies" (Wells et al., 2020b, para. 1). The SWA designation was initially referred to as the Primary Woman Administrator (PWA) before evolving in 1989 into the SWA position as we know it today. As defined by the NCAA (2018a), the modern SWA designation serves to signify "the highest-ranking female involved with the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletic program" (Wells et al., 2020a, p. 1).

When it comes to the SWA role, 59 percent of women holding the designation agree that they are actively engaged in key decision-making at the highest level of the institution (NCAA, 2018b). To the contrary, 71 percent of athletic directors believed their SWAs were actively engaged in key decision-making at the highest level of the institution (NCAA, 2018b). These mismatched understandings create a discrepancy between actual power of the designation versus the stated power that is attached to the role, and potentially the perceptions that men have of the women who serve in the role. Because of these incongruencies, women are more likely to rely on connection power, or power associated with one's network (Hersey et al., 1979). The following provides an in-depth look at the life cycle, stigmatization, and power associated with the SWA designation and whether it is useful to the women who serve in it today.

Statement of the Problem

Although federal legislation such as Title IX has led to an increase of women participating in athletics over the years, leadership roles for women in athletics are few and far

between (Whisenant et al., 2002). While women oversaw 90 percent of women's athletic programs in 1972, by the year 2000, that percentage had dropped to a mere 18 percent (Acosta & Carpenter, 2002; Whisenant et al., 2002). The decrease in leadership roles eventually led to the development of the SWA designation, which was aimed at remedying the issue of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics (Smith et al., 2020).

Despite some significant growth and advancement in its earliest years, confusion has surrounded the SWA designation in recent years (Wells et al., 2020a). Due in part to the confusion surrounding the designation, the self-perceived power of the women serving in that role has also been impacted. According to a 2017 report released by the NCAA, the following were outlined as common misperceptions surrounding the SWA designation:

- "The SWA is NOT the senior women's administrator; it is the senior **woman** administrator. The purpose of the role is not to oversee women's sports or be limited to gender equity compliance.
- The SWA designation is not a position.
- "Senior" refers to the highest-ranking female in the athletics department, and not the longest serving or oldest.
- The SWA designation is not a requirement. The NCAA Constitution defines the term, and does not technically require an institution to have an SWA" (NCAA, 2018b, p. 9).

The confusion associated with the designation has impacted growth in leadership roles for women in collegiate athletics; however, the NCAA has shown a marked increase in female student-athlete participation over the years. In December 2020, the NCAA published a report in the form of an interactive visual dashboard showing sponsorship and participation totals across all divisions. While the total number of NCAA sponsored men's sports programs has essentially

stayed the same since 1982 (2,778 programs in 1982 vs. 2,989 programs in 2020), only noting a 7.5 percent increase, the number of NCAA sponsored women's sports programs has nearly doubled across 40 years jumping from 1,767 programs in 1982 to 3,672 or 108 percent (NCAA, 2020).

The number of individual women participants has kept up with the growth of NCAA sponsored women's programs during the last 40 years as well. The report indicates an increase of more than 60,000 female student-athletes participating in NCAA athletics from 1982 to 2020, while their male counterparts saw an increase of just over 23,000 participants over the same time frame (NCAA, 2020).

In the 2019-2020 academic year, specifically, the NCAA recorded a total of 6,661 sponsored athletic programs at the Division I level, noting a split of 2,989 men's programs and 3,672 women's programs (NCAA, 2020). Those 6,661 athletic programs saw 184,068 student-athletes participating with a split of 97,423 male student-athletes and 86,645 female student-athletes (NCAA 2020).

With such a significant increase in female participation, it is important to explore why leadership roles in athletics have not grown at the same rate for women. Women have often been forgotten from leadership roles since the NCAA merged with the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1981. Although the SWA designation was created to combat the exact issue of the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics, much is left to be desired.

Many have pointed to gender stigmatization as a key factor in the lack of growth for women in athletics leadership roles (Burton et al., 2009; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Peachey and Burton, 2011; Powell et al., 2008; Wells et al., 2020). With stigmatization comes stereotyping,

and Peachey and Burton's (2011) study on the perceptions of leader effectiveness among men and women does well to explain social role theory and role congruity theory as they relate to the topic of women in leadership roles in college athletics. Social role theory "suggests that there are qualities and behavioral tendencies believed to be desirable for each gender, as well as expectations as to which roles women and men should occupy" (Peachey & Burton, 2011, p. 418). Role congruity theory, a descendant of social role theory, posits that women in leadership roles may experience prejudice "because leadership ability is more generally ascribed to men who exhibit agentic qualities than to women who display more communal characteristics" (Peachey & Burton, 2011, p. 418).

These theories serve as a great foundation to understand how stigmas associated with women in leadership roles may impact women serving as an SWA and lead to varying levels of confusion within athletic departments. In order to combat the confusion – and the stigmatization – that exists within and around the SWA role, we should discover whether the designation is still necessary or effective in today's landscape of college athletics.

Additionally, the timing is prime for this analysis of the SWA role as the COVID-19 pandemic has offered organizations the opportunity to reexamine existing structures in the workplace. As universities and organizations attempt to review and potentially realign themselves, now is the time to revisit the SWA designation and its effectiveness. This qualitative study will examine the factors – historical, structural, and social – that affect the SWA designation and the women who serve in the role. The study will also review how credibility and perceived power can impact the effectiveness of the designation.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research is to gain insight to the experiences of the women who hold the SWA designation and their perceptions about the power the title holds. As such, the study employed a phenomenological design using open-ended interview questions. Lichtman (2013) posited "the purpose of phenomenology is to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon" (p. 83). Because this study examines the perceptions of power in women in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States, phenomenology is the best option to capture the essence of how those women feel about their perceived power. The study is designed to provide participants an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences, as well as consider external factors that may influence their perception of power as it relates to their SWA designation.

Given that the SWA designation was originally implemented to increase the number of women serving in leadership roles within college athletic departments, it is important to consider why women's growth in those roles has largely plateaued or decreased in the years since the designation was created (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008). In 1990, Dick Schulz, a former executive director of the NCAA, conducted a study to determine why the number of women in leadership roles in college athletics was decreasing. He suggested that representation of women in athletic departments was not only about equality, but about the overall mission of the NCAA (1990). Schulz stated, "Gender balance is important if we are to meet our educational mission and serve our student-athletes well" (NCAA, 1990, p. 1).

An examination of the past is vital to the future success of women in leadership roles in college athletics. Although many point to societal norms, family care, and gender roles as reasons the number of women in leadership roles in athletics continues to decline (Acosta &

Carpenter, 2014; Whisenant et al., 2002), others pointed to salary and advancement discrepancies (Parks et al., 1995). Parks et al.'s (1995) research discussed the "paradox of the contented working woman" (p. 73), which refers to women who enjoy their actual jobs, aside from their salary and potential for advancing within the field or their department.

This study's findings not only aim to add to the existing research on women serving in the SWA role, but in leadership roles in college athletics overall. Because of the existing gender gap in leadership roles in college athletics, this research will serve as an important continuation of a conversation that often focuses only on head coaching roles (Rhode & Walker, 2008).

Research Questions

In order to understand the experiences of women serving in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States, four main research questions will be used to guide this research. The questions, which are utilized as section headings in the actual interview guide (Appendix D), are intended to delve into each participant's experience as an SWA.

The following questions guide this study:

1. How does the administrator in the SWA role self-report her overall experience in the role?
2. How does the SWA perceive the overall power of her designation?
3. Does the administrator in the SWA role perceive herself to have true decision-making power within the athletic department?
4. How do administrators in the SWA role perceive the designation to add value to the athletic department?

The SWA designation was meant to serve as a part of an evolution for women in sport, to give them more decision-making power and propel more women into leadership roles within

college athletics. In many cases, though, it seems to have done the opposite (Plyley, 1997; Whisenant et al., 2002). By answering these questions, this study will gain insight into the self-perceived power held by female athletic administrators in the SWA position.

Conceptual Framework

In addition to a phenomenological design to better understand the essence of the SWA experience, the following conceptual frameworks will be utilized for this study to gain a more complete understanding of the designation and the power (or lack thereof) associated with it. The research and literature review will rely on Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to athletics and Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept of credibility and perceived power. These concepts serve to both guide the interview and data collection process and to provide a lens through which to view this study.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Whisenant et al. (2002) was one of the first to use hegemonic masculinity in sport, but this research would be remiss if it didn't credit the originator of the concept. Connell (1987, 1995) first conceptualized hegemonic masculinity as a "gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Connell (1987, 1995) coined the concept in an effort to begin exploring the accepted societal norms of women being subordinate to men in just about every existing category. In Connell's (1987, 1995) findings, "male" was the standard and "female" was the outlier.

Whisenant et al. (2002) built off of Connell's (1987, 1995, 2005) research on hegemonic masculinity and began by discussing the basis of hegemony before conceptualizing their version

of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to athletics. While their work focused specifically on the advancement of intercollegiate athletic directors, their research and findings are exceedingly relevant to the topic of perceived power among women serving in the SWA role as well.

Hegemony, which originally was defined as having "political and economic control … over another state," (Whisenant et al., 2002, p. 485) can be defined as Connell (1987, 1995) originally described it: a widely accepted societal norm. Whisenant et al. (2002) went on to suggest that hegemony "is the simple acceptance of the status quo in society" (p. 486). Within the landscape of college athletics, this acceptance of the status quo has led to the formation of what many refer to as the "good ol' boys network" (Mechels-Struby, 2013; Rhode & Walker, 2008). The acceptance of athletics as a majority-male space is part of what has contributed to the lack of women in leadership roles within college athletics.

Not unlike ungendered hegemony, hegemonic masculinity suggests that masculinity is the societal norm and in some way superior to femininity (Whisenant et al., 2002). This poses an acute issue for women working in athletics, as it suggests they are outside of what is commonplace; maybe even considered unusual in some circumstances (Whisenant et al., 2002). Hegemonic masculinity will serve as a key component of the conceptual framework for this research, which aims to explore a gender-specific role for women within athletic departments.

Credibility and Perceived Power

Nesler et al.'s (1993) study was "designed to examine the effect of credibility on the perceptions of power of a source" (p. 1409). Their research suggested that there should be a direct relationship between credibility and perception of power within a person, specifically in a social capacity (Nesler et al., 1993). When we consider women serving in the SWA role in the predominantly masculine field of athletics, it is important to examine credibility and the

perceived power of the woman serving in that role. This examination allows a deeper dive into the understanding of the SWA designation, and whether or not it is necessary or effective in its current state.

Carli's (1999) work does well to take Nesler et al.'s (1993) work to the next level, especially when it comes to gender, interpersonal power, and social influence – the last two of which we have learned are increasingly important for women in leadership roles in athletics (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Whisenant et al., 2002). Carli (1999) posited that while a person's environment can impact the amount of power they possess, "there is evidence that in general, men possess higher amount to expert and legitimate power than women do, and women possess higher amounts of referent power than men do" (p. 83). It is important to note here, that Carli (1999) went on to state that expert power, which men tend to possess more of, is not based "on actual competence, but perceived competence" (p. 83). If women are perceived to be, on average, less competent than men, this also means they are less influential in social situations (Carli, 1999).

As mentioned in the introduction, only 59 percent of SWAs agree that they are actively engaged in key decision-making at the highest level of their institution, while 71 percent of athletic directors believed SWAs the same (NCAA, 2018b). However, this type of thought and competence discrepancy is not limited to the world of college athletics. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2016) found that 63 percent of women agreed that obstacles exist for women that make it harder for women than men, while only 41 percent of men thought the same. The Pew Research Center (2014) also conducted studies on women and men in politics and business and largely found that women were presumed to be better at compromise, while men excelled at risk-taking. Compromise aligns well with referent power (often seen in women), as it

focuses more on relationship-building (Carli, 1999; French & Raven, 1959; Hersey et al., 1979). Risk-taking, on the other hand, aligns well with expert power and legitimate power, which are more based on perception than reality (Carli, 1999; French & Raven, 1959; Hersey et al., 1979).

As we move further into the research, these concepts of power and gender roles will continue to serve as a guiding light. The aforementioned research questions were framed with Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept of credibility and perceived power in mind.

Operational Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this research and are defined as follows:

A. Senior Woman Administrator (SWA): "the highest-ranking female involved with the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletic program" (NCAA, 2018a, p. 18).
B. NCAA Division I: the top level of membership competition within NCAA intercollegiate athletics, which, on average, includes institutions with the most available athletic scholarships, enrolls the most students, and manages the largest athletic budgets (NCAA, 2021b).
C. Power: having authority, influence, and decision-making power over others.

Chapter Summary

The first chapter introduced an overview of the topic to be explored: perceptions of power among women serving in the SWA designation at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. The chapter also provided the purpose and significance of this study, the study's intended research questions and conceptual framework, and operational definitions that are relevant to this study. The next chapter will provide an in-depth review of the literature as it

relates to women in leadership roles in college athletics, specifically those serving in the SWA designation.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This research aims to better understand the SWA designation and the perception of power among the women who hold the title. While the following literature review will examine the overall experiences of women administrators in college athletics, the focus will be on those serving in the SWA role. The broad review of women administrators in college athletics allows context in an otherwise specific examination of what was intended to be a leadership designation for women in college athletics.

Beginning with a look at the history of women in higher education, the literature review explores the experiences of women in higher education generally. Women's experiences in higher education date as far back as the 1800s, and, not unlike their male counterparts, have navigated through various changes and cultural events (e.g. World Wars, changes to federal legislation, etc.). The overview of women in higher education provides context for the experiences of women in college athletics, which is also an aspect of higher education in the United States.

Following the look at women in higher education, the literature examines the historical impact and influences of the governing bodies of men's college athletics, women's college athletics, and the eventual merged co-ed governing body of intercollegiate athletics as we know it today. The historical overview notes major events that led to the creation and current status of the SWA designation. It also examines the impact Title IX legislation has had on participation for women over the years – both in leadership positions and as student-athletes.

In addition to a historical overview, the literature focuses on the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics. Guided by Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to athletics, the lack of representation of women leadership roles in college athletics is examined in a way that helps provide some perspective on why the issue persists.

The literature explores the masculine nature of college athletics and the male-first mindset that so many adopt in college athletics, which is similar to Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Through the insight of reports such as Rhode and Walker's (2008) "Gender Equity in College Athletics, Women Coaches as a Case Study," the section on the masculine nature of college athletics examines the role gender plays in equity in college athletics.

Historical events, hegemonic masculinity, and the masculine nature of college athletics, are just a few barriers that exist for women working in college athletics. Several other barriers are discussed throughout the literature including societal norms, work or family conflicts, role congruency, and homologous reproduction (Mechels-Struby, 2013).

The value of the SWA role, including perception of power and stigmas associated with the role are also examined in the following review of literature. Wells et al.'s (2020a) suggestion that women are held to different standards of evaluation provides context for some of the stigmas associated with not only the SWA designation, but for women working in college athletics in general. Eagly and Karau's (2002) work on role congruity theory is utilized in this section as well, as it posits that women in leadership roles are subject to prejudices because leadership skills are more generally attributed to men.

Finally, factors that affect the overall perception and self-perception of women serving in the SWA role are explored throughout the following literature review. Factors such as role congruency and organizational leadership charts within intercollegiate athletics are examined in an effort to provide insight on women serving in the SWA role. A summary follows the literature review and discusses whether the SWA designation has ultimately been helpful or hurtful.

Women in Higher Education

After having been banned from attending colleges and universities, Oberlin College was among the first to admit women in 1837 (Graham, 1978). In the 1860s and 1870s, women's interest in higher education began to pick up steam (Schwartz, 1997). Female enrollment at colleges and universities started off slowly, but women were persistent in their pursuit of higher education and by 1880 they made up 32 percent of the undergraduate population at all colleges and universities (Graham, 1978; Schwartz, 1997). It has been detailed that their experiences were anything but easy. Schwartz (1997) even went so far as to say that women "*survived* their experiences as students, faculty, and administrators" (p. 504). That higher education has ever been an experience to "survive" for women tells us a great deal about some of the obstacles that women have faced since the 1800s.

Schwartz (1997) went on to state that those women who did "survive" the early days of their enrollment and involvement in higher education were prosperous. This aligns well with Graham's (1978) historical timeline, which states that "a record 32.5 percent of college presidents, professors, and instructors were women … in 1930" (p. 764). This period of prosperity saw a decline soon thereafter, however, as men returned home from war and women in academia and the professional workforce hit a low point in 1960 (Graham, 1978; Parker, 2015). Parker (2015) notes that the population of women on college campuses had decreased to

just 21 percent in the mid-1950s. This led to a "general erosion of the respect and prominence of women on college campuses" (Parker, 2015, p. 9). While women had more access to higher education in the 1900s, the attitudes toward them on campuses likely led to the decline of their presence during this era (Parker, 2015).

In the 1960s and 1970s, legislation like the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX in 1972 moved the United States toward more equal workplaces and educational rights for women (Parker, 2015). Although this legislation encouraged more women to participate in and lead certain aspects of higher education at the time, the initial growth has not always kept up with the times (Johnson, 2017; Parker, 2015). In 2009, a report titled "The White House Project: Benchmarking Women's Leadership" was published (Johnson, 2017). The report shared findings on women in leadership roles across ten different segments of the workforce in the United States, and in 2017, an update on some of the initial statistics was shared (Johnson, 2017).

Johnson's (2017) update on "The White House Project" shared the following data points:

- "Women have earned more than 50% of all associate degrees since 1978;
- Women have earned more than 50% of all bachelor's degrees since 1982;
- Women have earned more than 50% of all master's degrees since 1987; and
- Women have earned more than 50% of all doctoral degrees since 2006" (p. 3).

Despite this representation of women as students in higher education, 86 percent of all presidents, provosts, and chancellors and 75 percent of full professors on college campuses were still male as of 2012 (Parker, 2015; Johnson, 2017). Parker (2015) went on to state that further data shows that when compared to their male counterparts, female professors "move up the career ladder slower, are less productive, have heavier teaching loads, and have lower salaries" (p. 9).

These data do well to share the broader context of women in higher education. This section also prefaces several parallel experiences to women in athletics. Women's history in athletics *is* women's history in higher education, and the two are inextricably weaved together throughout the historical overview of women administrators in college athletics.

Historical Overview of Women Administrators in College Athletics

Not unlike what was outlined above, the 1900s were a century of massive growth and change for the United States. Women's experiences in intercollegiate athletics – both in participation and access – are no exception to that growth (Plyley, 1997). Figure 1 below is a visual representation of the many changes women's intercollegiate athletics experienced during the 20th century.

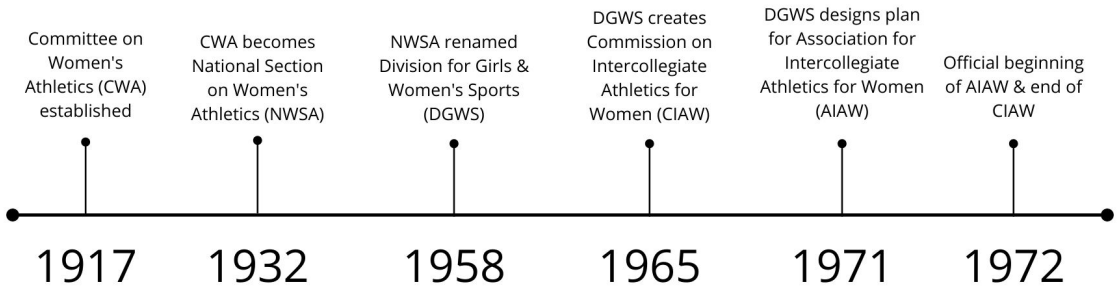

Figure 1: Timeline of changes to women's athletics governing bodies (Plyley, 1997).

During the 1960s, as women's athletics were becoming more widely accepted as a legitimate entity, it became necessary to create an official governing organization (Plyley, 1997; Wu, 1999). The AIAW was designed in 1971, and officially implemented in July of 1972 (Plyley, 1997). While there were other recognized structures that previously surrounded and

governed women's athletics, the AIAW was the first to truly fight for equality in the athletic and educational landscape for women (McCartney, 2007).

NCAA Takeover of AIAW

The AIAW's main mission was "to develop and promote a women's athletic program through the promulgation and enforcement of standard rules, the administration of championship programs, and the generation of commercial support and visibility" (Plyley, 1997, p. 6). Following its formation, the AIAW went on to serve as the primary governing body for women's intercollegiate athletics for another decade before stopping all operations in 1982 (Plyley, 1997; Whisenant et al., 2002).

In July of 1980, the existing presidents of the AIAW held a conference at the University of Iowa, which was referred to as the Presidential Review (Wilson, 2013). The reason for holding the conference was to discuss the NCAA's vote in 1980 to add women's championships to their Division II and III levels (Wilson, 2013). The NCAA's vote to sponsor women's sports in 1980 appeared to be in direct contrast of their previous interests as an organization, as they heavily lobbied against Title IX regulations shortly after their passage (Plyley, 1997).

The NCAA, which was solely focused on men's intercollegiate athletics until 1980, was not the only college governing organization interested in supporting women's athletics (Plyley, 1997). The National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) began hosting women's championships for nine sports in 1980-81 (Plyley, 1997). The following academic year (1981-1982), all three organizations (i.e., AIAW, NCAA, NAIA) hosted championships for women's sports – a stark contrast to previous years when the AIAW exclusively hosted women's intercollegiate athletics championships (Plyley, 1997; Wilson, 2013).

The stoppage of the AIAW came at the hands of a merger with the NCAA, despite the fact that the NCAA had only been a governing body for men's intercollegiate athletics until their seemingly sudden interest in women's sports in the early 1980s (Plyley, 1997; Whisenant et al., 2002). The AIAW/NCAA relationship presented an opportunity for growth and additional exposure for women's athletics; however, the merger ended up resulting in a dramatic struggle for power for control of women's athletics that, in some ways, still continues today (Plyley, 1997; Whisenant et al., 2002). While the AIAW was not the first organized structure to hold oversight of women's athletics, it was the first recognized governing body that provided a source of empowerment for the women who were a part of it (Plyley, 1997).

It is worth noting here that prior to the merger, the AIAW had grown its membership from 278 institutional members to nearly 1,000 in its first 10 years of existence (Plyley, 1997). Ultimately, the NCAA leaned on Title IX legislation – which they had previously lobbied against – to justify their semi-abrupt decision to sponsor women's athletics at the college level (Plyley, 1997).

The NCAA's decision to adopt women's athletics and merge with the AIAW led to a "marked decline in membership [in the AIAW], from 961members in 1980-81 to 759 in 1981-82" (Plyley, 1997, p. 10). The 21 percent decrease in membership also led to a decline in funds for the already young organization that the AIAW was (Wilson, 2013). The NCAA, which had more legitimacy due to its reputation as the men's college athletics governing body, was able to lean on existing membership dues from men's college athletic programs, as well as gain additional dues from newly initiated women's college athletic programs (Wilson, 2013). Perhaps even more devastating than the loss of membership dues, though, was the AIAW's loss of a "million-dollar television contract with NBC, a deal negotiated with the expectation that the

AIAW would be *the only* sponsor of women's intercollegiate championships" (Wilson, 2013, p. 10).

The rapid decline of the AIAW, which had built itself up almost as quickly as it fell, can be attributed to a number of factors, most notably, the NCAA's interest in adding women's athletics. In addition to the NCAA/AIAW merger, however, there are some implications that Title IX may have had unintended effects on women in leadership roles in college athletics. The following section examines Title IX legislation and its impact.

The Impact of Title IX

The AIAW established itself as a leading force for women's athletics and equal opportunity, so much so that the United States government took notice (Plyley, 1997). Because of the organization's efforts to create more administrative and athletic opportunities for women, an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964 was proposed in 1971 (Plyley, 1997). Eventually, after "considerable Congressional debate," the amendment was signed in to place on June 23, 1972, and became what we know today as Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (2018; Plyley, 1997).

As a reminder, Title IX states that no person in the United States will be discriminated against "on the basis of sex" in any program that receives federal assistance (Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, 1972). College athletic programs are educational in nature and they receive federal funding, which means that the passage of Title IX put college athletic departments at risk of losing that federal funding if they did not comply (Women's Sports Foundation, n.d.). The bill not only exposed issues within athletics, but in American educational institutions across the board (Plyley, 1997).

Effects of Equity Laws: Intended & Unintended

Title IX has worked in many capacities to increase opportunities for women in sport and education. However, in some cases, it has actually had an opposite effect (Whisenant et al., 2002). As the AIAW began to gain notoriety, men began to take an interest in leadership roles and female athletic administrators began to be pushed out of the roles they had held for so many years (Elsesser, 2019). Title IX provided (and still provides) equal funding for men's and women's athletics at institutions who received federal funding, which has been exceptionally beneficial for female student-athletes (Elsesser, 2019). However, the legislation had nearly a completely reverse effect on women in coaching and leadership roles (Elseser, 2019).

While women held 90 percent of the coaching jobs for women's teams in the years prior to the passage of Title IX in 1972, as of 2019 women only held only 40.8 percent of those roles (Elsesser, 2019). The unfortunate reality is that these data do not stop at coaching roles. Whisenant et al. (2002) point out that although the NCAA/AIAW merger led to an increase in female athlete participation in sports, "there was a vast reduction in the percentage of women in senior decision-making positions within athletic departments" (p. 486). Additionally, drawing from an annual report created by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics and Sport (TIDES), Elsesser (2019) highlighted that "women made up only 10.5% of Division I athletics directors" (para. 7) compared to more than 90 percent prior to Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The 2019 TIDES report goes on to state the following significant gender discrepancies in leadership roles within college athletics: "Associate athletics directors were 67.7 percent male and 32.3 percent female in Division I and assistant athletics directors were 69.0 percent male and 31.0 percent female in Division I in 2018-2019" (Lapchick et al., 2020, p. 27). The TIDES report placed the above statistic at a C+ level grade for gendered hiring and noted an increase from 31.4

to 32.3 percent from 2017-2018 for women in the roles of associate and assistant athletics directors at NCAA Division I institutions (Lapchick et al., 2020).

In addition to the TIDES report the Tucker Center has produced a longitudinal research series over the past nine years, which outlines information on women in college coaching. In their 2020-2021 report, Boucher et al. (2021) include the following figure to demonstrate the discrepancies over time in head coaching roles at the NCAA Division I level.

Year	Schools	Female		Male		Total Coaches
	N	%	n	%	n	N
2017–18 Head Coaches	349	41.7	1463	58.3	2049	3512
2018–19 Head Coaches	351	42.1	1491	57.9	2050	3541
2019–20 Head Coaches	352	42.3	1501	57.8	2054	3555
2020–21 Head Coaches	357	42.7	1527	57.3	2051	3578

Figure 2: Percentage of Division-I Women Head Coaches for Women's Teams (Boucher et al., 2021).

While there is a slight increase of women in head coaching roles in college noted in the figure, men still predominantly hold the role of head coach. Women are still serving in head coaching roles at a rate of 15 percent less than their male counterparts despite significant growth in female student-athlete participation over the years (Boucher et al., 2021; NCAA, 2020).

Addition of the SWA Designation

As outlined by the aforementioned data, the merging of the AIAW with the NCAA brought on a significant loss of control of women's sports for women in leadership roles (McCartney, 2007). During the merger with the NCAA, men who served in the role of athletic director generally assumed the role of oversight for both men's and women's intercollegiate sports (McCartney, 2007). Women who had previously served as athletic directors for women's

intercollegiate sports were effectively pushed out of those roles (McCartney, 2007). The merger's impact on women in leadership roles seems to be an oversight by the NCAA during the merger process, as it set women up to be underrepresented in leadership roles for decades to come.

In an attempt to right the ship, so to speak, at the beginning of the merger, the NCAA introduced the position of Primary Woman Administrator (PWA) in 1981 (Smith et al., 2020). At the time, it was introduced as a designation for the individual – male or female – overseeing intercollegiate women's sports at their given institution (Smith et al., 2020). A few years later, the position evolved into the gender-based designation we know it as today: the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA). The renaming from PWA to SWA came in 1989 and added new responsibilities that were aimed at "creat[ing] a means for women to be more involved in the overall management of college athletics" (Smith et al., 2020, p. 119).

According to Acosta and Carpenter (2014), "9 out of 10 athletics programs have at least one female on the administrative staff" (p. E). At first glance, this statistic seems like a good thing for women serving in leadership roles in college athletics. However, a closer examination tells us that 9 of 10 athletic programs have *at least* one woman administrator. One woman administrator in an entire athletic department is not representative of the student-athlete population most athletic departments serve. While it may have been implemented with good intentions, the SWA designation has progressed in a way that often leaves *only* one woman in senior-level administrative roles at NCAA institutions (Smith et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020). While women made up more than 90 percent of head administrators within intercollegiate athletics prior to 1972, that percentage had dwindled to less than 25 percent by 2014 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

Although it was created to ensure women were serving in at least one leadership role in the athletic department, the SWA designation has failed to progress with the times. The following examines the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics and explores some of the factors that have prohibited women from assuming those roles.

Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles in College Athletics

Knowledge of the historical aspects of women in athletics help us understand how underrepresentation of women in leadership roles continues to happen across the landscape of intercollegiate athletics today. In 2013, an audit by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation "found that women are underrepresented on national governing bodies of sport at worryingly low levels" (Hancock & Hums, 2016, p. 198). Part of what contributes to those "worryingly low levels" is a societal "bias [that] makes us gravitate toward men" when we consider leadership positions (Elsesser, 2019, para. 11). If female student-athletes do not see women in administrative roles, they may find it difficult to imagine pursuing a career in college athletics.

Hancock and Hums (2016) point to "homologous reproduction" as one reason for the lack of representation. Homologous reproduction alludes to the fact that people are more likely to hire people with similar characteristics to them (Kanter, 1977). Simply put, homologous reproduction in an athletic department would mean that men are more likely to hire other men into leadership roles within the department, rather than hiring a woman. Hancock and Hums (2016) also suggest underrepresentation is double-edged sword, and state that "the lack of female representation in executive levels of management perpetuates the stereotype that women are not capable or qualified for substantive leadership roles" (p. 204).

This "social acceptance of gendered norms" is the framework Whisenant et al. (2002) refer to as "hegemonic masculinity" (McCartney, 2007). As outlined in the conceptual

framework for this research, Whisenant et al. (2002) described the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a societal acceptance that masculinity (or behavior typically associated with men) is the preferred characteristic for leaders. This concept ties well to the previously mentioned homologous reproduction as explained by Hancock and Hums (2016). If hegemonic masculinity is an accepted form of practice, even on the subconscious level, hiring practices are likely to reflect that as well, thereby creating additional barriers for women in sport (McCartney, 2007).

Acosta and Carpenter (2006) found homologous reproduction and hegemonic masculinity to be alive and well in athletic departments in their 29-year update on their longitudinal study studying women in intercollegiate athletics. Their findings showed that when an athletic director is male at the NCAA Division I level, "only 43.3% of the coaches for women's teams are female compared to when the athletic director is a female, 48.5% of the coaches are female (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006 p. 10). While a five percent difference may not seem like much, at the very least, it does well to show the effects of homologous reproduction. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to hire women, but women may also be subject to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which could explain the small difference in percentages.

Masculine Nature of College Sports

We have established that athletics is a predominantly male space which has led to an underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in the space. One factor to consider is that sport may socially accepted as masculine because men's history with athletics is much longer standing – and has been much more widely accepted for much longer – than women's history with athletics.

Men's long-standing involvement and oversight of college athletics – both men's and women's – has created, in some cases, what is often referred to as the "good ol' boys' network"

(Mechels-Struby, 2013; Rhode & Walker, 2008). Unfortunately, this mindset – which aligns well with Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity – suggests that men in leadership roles hire people who look and act like them (McCartney, 2007; Mechels-Struby, 2013). Rhode and Walker (2008) point to the "good ol' boys' network" as a key consideration in their research because participants reported issues of "forms of favoritism" within the sphere of college athletics administration (p. 36). By that standard, the "good ol' boys network" can be seen as a tangible form of homologous reproduction at work in a college athletic department (McCartney, 2007).

In their study titled "Gender Equity in College Athletics, Women Coaches as a Case Study," Rhode and Walker (2008) found that most participants believed time and experience to be a major factor in why women had less leadership roles within intercollegiate athletics. As a result of Title IX and the NCAA/AIAW merger, salaries for coaching positions of women's athletic teams went up, which, in turn, attracted more men to the roles (Rhode & Walker, 2008). As a result, women working in athletics experienced more competition for coaching and other leadership positions and were effectively left out of consideration for positions with high-revenue sports that typically lead to elevated leadership roles in athletic departments (Rhode & Walker, 2008). This alludes to the "double-edged sword" Hancock and Hums (2016) discuss: as women are left out of consideration and not hired the stereotype that men are more capable for such positions is perpetuated.

In addition to time and experience, Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as an additive to the masculine nature of college athletics. They posited that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a "social acceptance of gendered norms." The concept of hegemonic masculinity, especially within athletic departments, can lead to the previously

mentioned homologous reproduction as explained by Hancock and Hums (2016). Because athletics is a male-dominated field, hiring practices within athletic departments are likely to be homologous, resulting in the hiring of more men, thereby creating less space for women in sport, and again perpetuating an untrue stereotype that women are less capable of serving successfully in leadership roles in college athletics (Hancock & Hums, 2006; McCartney, 2007).

Despite the knowledge of the constraints of time and experience, Peachey and Burton (2011) posited that most organizational practices and procedures serve to propagate male dominance within the field of athletics. We have established that there is a gender gap within leadership in college athletics. With men representing the majority of athletic directors (80.7 percent, as noted by Peachey and Burton in 2011), it is no surprise that the field continues to be dominated by men. Due in large part to hegemonic masculinity and homologous reproduction, men hold the most influential and powerful roles in athletic departments, while women are left to more traditional gendered roles, such as student-facing roles like academics, compliance, and student-athlete development (Peachey & Burton, 2011). Peachey and Burton (2011) postulated that, in addition to being underrepresented and being funneled into certain gendered roles, women are also compensated for their work at a lower rate than their male counterparts. Male-dominance serves as just one of many barriers for women in college athletics. The following section explores additional barriers women in athletics face.

Barriers for Women

When discussing women in the workplace, "the glass ceiling" is almost always a phrase that is mentioned. The phrase, which was first conceptualized in the 1980s, is a metaphor of some of the non-visible barriers that exist for women and minorities attempting to work their way up the corporate ladder (Johns, 2013). In 1995, several barriers women face were affirmed

by a report issued by the Glass Ceiling Commission (Johns, 2013). The report outlined two major societal barriers for women and minorities: "The Supply Barrier – Opportunity and Achievement" and "The Difference Barrier – Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Bias" (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 27).

The report shares in depth how the Supply Barrier impacts career mobility for women and minorities and shares ways in which stereotypes can lead to corporate biases and affect hiring practices (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). The Glass Ceiling Commission's findings illustrate the barriers that exist, and have existed, across the board for women in all fields of work. Although women have been more visible in the field of academia than in many other fields, higher education has its own stereotypes and biases which can prevent the advancement of women to leadership roles.

Barriers for Women in Higher Education

As previously mentioned, the field of higher education is not exempt from the glass ceiling. Barriers such as biases and discrimination in the workplace still exist for women in higher education (Lewis, 2012). Lewis (2012) pointed out the familial responsibilities that typically fall on women as a major and multi-faceted barrier for women in higher education. In an attempt to avoid biases related to familial care, women in higher education may employ strategies such as staying single or not having children (or having fewer children than desired) in order to "keep up" with their male counterparts (Lewis, 2012).

Lewis (2012) went on to suggest that men may be intentionally or unintentionally upholding gender discrepancies and biases in the workplace. As discussed earlier, things like Connell's (1987, 1995, 2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Eagly and Karau's (2002) work on social role theory and role congruity theory aid in the status quo. If women are

underrepresented in leadership roles, they also have a less mobile upward path to those roles than their male counterparts. Lewis (2012) posited that "men who hold positions of leadership or authority have a vested interest in maintaining those positions, thus excluding women from consideration for open positions of leadership" (p. 12). The following section discusses the continuation of these barriers within college athletics and examines additional obstacles that are specific to the experiences of women in college athletics.

Barriers for Women in College Athletics

Given the broader context of barriers for women in the workplace, it is not difficult to imagine the existence of similar and added barriers for women working in college athletics. Connell's (1987, 1995, 2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, as used by Whisenant et al. (2002) regarding sport, and Eagly and Karau's (2002) work on social role theory and role congruity theory do well to provide us with a lens through which to view these barriers. While research does not directly connect barriers for women serving in the SWA role to the underrepresentation of women in college athletics, it is likely that the same barriers that affect women in college athletics contribute in some form or fashion to the lack of growth and development experienced in the SWA role since its inception (Mechels-Struby, 2013; McCartney, 2007; Rhode & Walker, 2008).

Mechels-Struby (2013) pointed to hegemony as an obvious barrier for women in athletics, but also suggests additional barriers such as "work/family conflict, role congruency theory, [and] homologous reproduction" (p. 18). Mechels-Struby (2013) explained that societal norms lead to women balancing childcare with their career paths, while their male counterparts rarely experience the same balancing act. This societal acceptance that women are the primary caretakers in the family has a long history of negatively impacted women's careers (Mechels-

Struby, 2013; Lewis, 2012; Rhode & Walker, 2008). Rhode and Walker (2008) also pointed to an "inability to accommodate family responsibilities" as being a major cause for women to remove themselves from the leadership track. Homologous reproduction comes into play yet again with family responsibilities, as men may be more likely to hire other men who, in theory, may not have to serve as the primary caretaker for their family (Hancock & Hums, 2006; Rhode & Walker, 2008).

In addition to balancing work and family as a barrier, McCartney (2007) mentioned lack of critical mass as an additional barrier. Critical mass refers to the number of women in leadership roles (McCartney, 2007). Although McCartney's (2007) research is not directly related to SWAs or intercollegiate athletics, it examines the experiences of women in higher education and suggests that lack of critical mass – or the lack of women in leadership roles in higher education – is a key barrier for women. McCartney (2007) alleged that "the under-representation of women in senior leadership limits the effectiveness of the few women currently serving in such positions and also shortchanges the constituencies institutional leadership represents" (p. 37). McCartney's (2007) concept of critical mass aligns well with Parker's (2015) suggestions that the respect for women on college campuses eroded as their presence declined in the 1950s and 1960s.

By this standard, critical mass in athletics could point directly to the SWA designation as a barrier. As we have established, the SWA designation is defined as the highest-ranking female in an athletic department. This definition of having one single "high-ranking" female in an athletic department could also serve as a barrier, as women who serve in the role in college athletic departments may find it difficult to advance beyond the "highest-ranking" designation that the SWA role is defined to be.

Value of SWA Designation

Thanks in part to legislation and a recognition of inequality at the national level, women's athletics evolved in many ways throughout the years. However, a gap continues to exist between men and women in positions of power in athletics at every level (Wells et al., 2020a). Despite overall advancements for women such as an increase in participating female student-athletes, increased percentage of women in the workforce, the shrinking wage gap, etc., significant gender inequality still exists, especially in positions of leadership and power (Wells et al., 2020a, p. 69).

Wells et al. (2020a) also suggested that women are held to different standards of evaluation, which aligns well with Eagly and Karau's (2002) work on role congruity theory. Similar to hegemonic masculinity, role congruity theory posits that women in leadership roles are subject to prejudices because leadership skills are more generally attributed to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This type of double standard can be particularly challenging for women when they are attempting to establish credibility in a leadership role.

Peachey and Burton's (2011) work on the perceptions of leader effectiveness between male and female athletic directors does well to explain how certain stereotypes can occasionally be advantageous when paired with certain leadership types. While Peachey and Burton (2011) acknowledged Eagly and Karau's (2002) finding that women are held to different evaluation standards than their male counterparts, they also suggest that "female leaders have been evaluated more favorably than men when displaying transformational leadership" (p. 418). This type of alignment of leadership and gender role could translate to a form of power for women in leadership roles in college athletics.

Power of Women in Leadership Roles

There are many different types of power, especially as it relates to leadership. In 1959, French and Raven conceptualized a theory of social power that postulated there are five types of power: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power (French & Raven, 1959). French and Raven (1959) describe each type as follows:

- Reward power is "based on [a person's] perception that [another person, gender role, social norm etc.] has the ability to mediate rewards for [her/him]" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 263);
- Coercive power is "based on [a person's] perception that [another person, gender role, social norm etc.] has the ability to mediate punishments for [her/him]" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 263);
- Legitimate power is "based on the perception by [a person] that [another person, gender role, social norm etc.] has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for [her/him]" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 263);
- Referent power is "based on [a person's] identification with [another person, gender role, social norm etc.]" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 263); and
- Expert Power is "based on the perception that [another person, gender role, social norm etc.] has some special knowledge or expertness" (French & Raven, 1959, p. 263).

While French and Raven's (1959) research is quite broad, more recent research does exist as it relates directly to athletics. One study that is newer than French and Raven (1959), albeit still dated compared to the current year, was completed by Hersey et al. in 1979. In their discussion on situational leadership, Hersey et al.'s (1979) work built upon French and Raven's

(1959) initial five types of power and discusses seven types: coercive power, connection power, expert power, information power, legitimate power, referent power, and reward power.

Power, Women, and Higher Education

We established early on in this literature review that while women's participation in higher education has experienced exponential growth over the years, it has not necessarily led to career opportunities, leadership roles, or additional power (Parker, 2015; Johnson, 2017). Parker (2015) noted that the decrease in population of women on college campuses post World War II led to a "general erosion of the respect and prominence of women on college campuses" (Parker, 2015, p. 9). The loss of women in leadership roles in the post-war era likely contributed to the underrepresentation we continue to see today and to McCartney's (2007) concept of a lack of critical mass.

Existing barriers for, and underrepresentation of, women undoubtedly impact the types of power women are able to exhibit in higher education. If women are not in leadership positions on college campuses, then they are able to lean on virtually none of French and Raven's (1959) types of power since almost all of them depend on position and status. Instead, they would have to rely on Hersey et al.'s (1979) connection power, which relies on "connections with influential or important people" (p. 419).

Power, Women, and College Athletics

Although it is not directly related to the SWA designation, Hersey et al.'s (1979) work is important when considering perceived power versus actual power within the SWA role. Hersey et al. (1979) suggested that power is closely tied to what they refer to as situational leadership, or the consideration that the "maturity of the follower … dictates which style of leadership will

have the highest probability of success [and] determine[s] the power base that the leader should use to induce compliance or influence behavior" (Hersey et al., 1979, pp. 420-421).

Not unlike higher education in general, women in athletics must also rely on *connection power* over any other type when establishing credibility. Because college athletics is a predominantly male field, relying on connections with influential and/or important people is almost an absolute necessity for women attempting to establish credibility in leadership roles in college athletics (Hersey et al., 1979). So many of the other types of power outlined by Hersey et al. (1979) are generally associated with men, making it easy to see why the use of existing connections is important for women serving in leadership roles in college athletics.

Conversely, male leaders in college athletics are able to rely on the type of power Hersey et al. (1979) refer to as *legitimate power*. Legitimate power refers to a power gained based on a position held (Hersey et al., 1979). Hersey et al. (1979) posit that leaders "high in legitimate power induce compliance or influence others because the feel that this person has the right, by virtue of the position in the organization, to expect compliance" (p. 419). Because masculinity is often the socially accepted norm – and often sought out in hiring – for leadership behaviors, it is not hard to see that men would be more likely to lean on title and position within an organization as a source of power, rather than building connections with others as a source of power (Hersey et al., 1979; Whisenant, 2002).

Peachey and Burton (2011) stated that "leadership ability is more generally ascribed to men who exhibit agentic qualities than to women who display more communal characteristics" (p. 418). Their study on the perceptions of leader effectiveness among men and women uses social role theory, which "suggests that there are qualities and behavioral tendencies believed to be desirable for each gender, as well as expectations as to which roles women and men should

occupy" (Peachey & Burton, 2011, p. 418). The desirable tendencies for women, or the more communal characteristics, are foundational in relationship building and creating connections, which is part of the reason why women are able to wield this type of power in leadership roles (Hersey et al., 1979; Peachey & Burton, 2011).

French and Raven (1959) and Hersey et al.'s (1979) work on power laid a great foundation for the study done by Katz et al. in 2018. Katz et al., (2018) looked at the difference in networks between athletic directors and those serving in the SWA designation. By their initial calculations, and by definition of what the SWA designation *should* do for women serving in it, athletic director networks and SWA networks should be relatively similar in terms of size and scope (Katz et al., 2018). What Katz et al. (2018) found, however, was that the predominantly male athletic director networks were far more interconnected than the networks of SWAs. In an interconnected network like the one Katz et al. (2018) discussed, it is much easier to establish credibility via the *connection power* that Hersey et al., (1979) referred to.

Katz et al. (2018) went on to discuss the "isolation" of the SWA network, which alleges that some women serving in the SWA role may not have any connections with other women serving in the same role. This presents an issue because, as we've seen, connection power and the reliance on networks not only allows women to advance in collegiate athletics, but also allows them to share resources among colleagues and across conferences. Based on the literature, we can see why it is important for women to rely on their network to establish credibility and power within their roles (French & Raven, 1959; Hersey et al., 1979; Whisenant et al., 2002). Due to the masculine nature of college athletics and the isolation Katz et al. (2018) discussed, it is also crucial for women serving in the SWA role to build relationships beyond their existing

network to continue building credibility and power (Mechels-Struby, 2013; Whisenant et al., 2002).

Stigmas Associated with SWA Role

When considering the existing gender inequalities and the power discrepancies between men and women in leadership roles in the athletic department, it should come as no surprise that a stigma surrounds the SWA designation. Although the role was created to ensure that more women were involved in the governance of intercollegiate athletics, the designation no longer has any real responsibilities attached to it (Wells et al., 2020a). The designation is defined in the 2018 NCAA Division I Manual as "an institutional senior woman administrator is the highest ranking female involved with the management of the institution's intercollegiate athletic program" (NCAA, 2018a, p. 18). The manual goes on to state that if an institution has a female athletic director, which would truly be the highest-ranking female in the athletic department, the institution may designate another female in the department as the SWA (NCAA, 2018a, p. 18). As mentioned in the introduction, however, the NCAA manual only provides a definition – not a requirement that the SWA designation be instated on member institution campuses.

Wells et al. (2020a) point out that although the NCAA has defined the role in a way that ensures women have a seat at the table, actual decision-making power may be discounted when the SWA does not have the word "Director" in her official title. Because SWA is simply a designation, and not a set of defined job responsibilities, the woman holding the title could be operating in any level of the department from low- to mid- to senior-level administration. This inconsistency is part of what leads to the confusion and stigma that surrounds the SWA designation, such as the 12 percent difference between SWAs and their athletic directors

believing that SWAs are actively engaged in key decision-making at the highest level of the institution (59 percent of SWAs agree vs. 71 percent of athletic directors) (NCAA, 2018b).

In addition to differences about the role's intended use, another factor that can have adverse effects on both perception of power and career trajectory for women in athletics is the fact that women often land in roles that are student-facing or oversee Title IX and gender equity (Wells et al., 2020a). Smith et al. (2019) further that point in stating "SWAs are often … funneled into the soft areas of athletic department management such as marketing, academics, and student-life" (p. 480). Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity comes into play again, as does Eagly and Karau (2002) and Peachey and Burton's (2011) work on social role theory and role congruity theory, as the aforementioned roles tend to be more "nurturing." Roles that deal with decisions on finances, development, or external relations, however, tend to be filled by more men (Smith et al., 2019). If the majority of women in leadership roles in athletics are serving in "nurturing" roles within an athletic department, they do not necessarily have true influence on the decisions of the athletic department. The internal focus that the more nurturing roles requires disallows women to focus on external relations such as fundraising, donors, and overall business operations.

Factors that Affect the Overall and Self-Perception of Women in the SWA Role

Women working in college athletics experience a variety of factors that can affect their overall view of the SWA designation, as well as their self-perception of their responsibilities and decision-making power. As previously mentioned, factors like vague job descriptions, stigmas associated with women in athletics, and hegemonic masculinity can all impact the perception of women in the SWA role. The following section further explores factors that affect the perception of SWAs, including role congruency and organizational leadership charts.

Role Congruency

As previously outlined, the stigmatization and confusion that surrounds the SWA designation often leads to role incongruencies. Wells et al. (2020a) went so far as to point out that "in 2017, almost four decades post the initial designation of the SWA, there was still so much unknown that the NCAA directed and published the 'Optimization of the Senior Woman Administrator Designation'" (pp. 70-71). The report revealed four key findings:

1. While the SWA designation has involved women in administration, a "perception gap" exists on their decision-making ability;
2. Despite the creation and implementation of the SWA designation, women are still underrepresented in the most visible leadership positions in athletic departments (e.g. athletic director, head coach, etc.);
3. There is no consistency in experience of SWAs across NCAA divisions; and
4. There is a lack of understanding of what the SWA role actually is (NCAA 2018b).

Adding to the NCAA's (2018b) findings in the report is the fact that an inconsistency in qualifications, job responsibilities, and job titles also contributes to the confusion surrounding the role. A specific data point to note on the lack of understanding is that while 92 percent of athletic directors reported understanding the SWA designation's role and responsibility, only 45 percent of SWAs reported that they felt their athletic director understood their role on campus (NCAA, 2018b). This discrepancy in understanding can lead to role incongruencies, which ultimately serve as a factor that not only affects the experience of SWAs, but can also serve as an obstacle to advancement.

Despite the fact that the NCAA designates the SWA as the *highest*-ranking female within an athletic department, the NCAA's (2018b) report found that 65 percent of SWAs desired a

more senior position than the one they currently hold. This means that more than half of the women who hold the designation of "highest-ranking female" strive to achieve something beyond that.

In addition to the desire to gain a more senior role within an athletic department, another telling data point from the NCAA's (2018b) report is a "significant lack of understanding of the SWA role by the women who hold it, as well as all other key constituent groups in intercollegiate athletics" (p. 9). Only 50 percent of women who hold the SWA designation self-reported that they understand their role on campus, with only 41 percent self-reporting that they understand their role at the conference-level, and only 27 percent self-reported understanding their role at the national level (NCAA, 2018b). If only half of the women serving in the SWA designation understand their role, it poses the question of how anyone else should understand it. Confusion and discrepancies across divisions can also impact organizational leadership charts within an athletic department in that oversight responsibilities vary among SWAs at different institutions.

Organizational Leadership Charts

To further reiterate the presence of hegemonic masculinity within intercollegiate athletics, women in the SWA role rarely oversee what are most commonly referred to as the "revenue sports" (men's basketball and football) at the administrative level (NCAA, 2018b). A meager nine percent of SWAs at the NCAA Division I level oversee men's basketball and/or football, according to the report (NCAA, 2018b). Conversely, 94 percent of SWAs at the NCAA Division I level oversee sports other than men's basketball or football (NCAA, 2018b).

It's not just sport administration that presents a gap of women's leadership opportunities. Organizational charts within college athletic department can also "serve to perpetuate a gendered hegemony that affects women's advancement" (McCartney, 2007). Chliwniak's (1997) work is

not directly tied to the SWA designation, but it suggests that because organizational structures have been generated and upheld by men, they neglect to consider factors that may hinder or help women's experiences.

Similar to Wells et al.'s (2020a) suggestions that stigmas exist surrounding the SWA role, McCartney (2007) found that institutional climate and culture can lead to stereotyping that "associate[s] leadership with maleness" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 347). The findings of McCartney (2007) and Wells et al. (2020a), directly tie back to Whisenant's (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that masculinity is the preferred characteristic for leadership.

Chapter Summary: Senior Woman Administrator Designation: Helpful or Hurtful?

There is no question that women's athletics advanced significantly from the 20th century to the 21st century. The creation of structured organizations, such as the AIAW, led to more visibility and more validity for women's sports as an activity and a profession. Although it was well-intended, the AIAW/NCAA merger is one that has presented challenges for women's advancement in leadership roles in intercollegiate athletics (Plyley, 1997).

Thanks to both visible structures like the AIAW and its merger with the NCAA, the role of SWA was born and eventually evolved into what we know it as today. The position, which was created under the premise of acknowledging the need for women within athletic administration, has come under scrutiny in recent decades. Due partially to the systems that hold the designation, it has seen little to no growth over the years, leading to large discrepancies in understanding of the role itself.

While it is easy to say the overall institution of gender and societal norms is responsible for the lack of growth of the SWA, the reality is there are several factors that have impeded the

growth of the designation, and therefore women in athletics. Those factors include hegemonic role congruency (or incongruency), stigmas associated with women in athletics, and existing organizational leadership structures.

There is a lot to consider when it comes to the SWA designation in NCAA Division I athletics. Implemented with good intentions, the role has evolved into a sort of diversity and inclusion check box for institutions over the years – despite the fact that the NCAA does not require an SWA be designated on member institution campuses. Overall, the role presents issues of stigmatization, stereotyping, and stagnant growth for women in athletics.

In a male-dominated field such as athletics, it is important to challenge the status quo and ensure that women are not only be represented at the highest levels, but heard. As stated by Wells et al. (2020b), "having a gendered distinction like SWA does not protect women from gendered inequities; in fact, it reemphasizes the imbalance of power to what becomes the normalized, mostly male, alternative" (n.p.). Rather than including a designation that identifies the highest-ranking female in an athletic department, intercollegiate athletics should focus on reevaluating the systems that perpetuate a lack of women in leadership roles within NCAA member institutions across all divisions.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The literature in the previous chapter does well to provide context and an overview of the SWA designation. Although current scholarship exists, there is still plenty to be discovered about the SWA designation and its impact on the women who serve in it. Regarding existing literature, a focus tends to be placed on male vs. female leadership experiences (Hersey et al., 1979; Peachey & Burton, 2011; Whisenant et al., 2002). This singular, either-or focus takes away from a true examination of the women who serve in the SWA designation. Because a man cannot serve as an SWA, it is important to consider a broader view of how women fit into the overall organizational development of college athletics.

As such, a more holistic exploration of the factors that influence the experience of women serving in this role is needed to gain further insight. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain better insight to the lived experiences and perceptions of the SWA role at NCAA Division I college athletics institutions in the United States. The researcher will examine multiple aspects of the participants' experiences in an effort to develop a holistic perspective on women who hold the SWA designation and their perceptions about the power the title holds. Additionally, the research will look to explore any strategies utilized by women serving in the SWA role in order to establish or increase their level of perceived power at the institution at which they serve. The research will be guided by these questions:

1. How does the administrator in the SWA role self-report her overall experience in the role?
2. How does the SWA perceive the overall power of her designation?

3. Does the administrator in the SWA role perceive herself to have true decision-making power within the athletic department?
4. How do administrators in the SWA role perceive the designation to add value to the athletic department?

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology that is intended to guide this research. To begin, the research design is outlined, which includes information on the chosen methodology: phenomenology. Additionally, information about the study's proposed participants is included. Finally, details on the plan for data collection and analysis and credibility are discussed.

Research Design

It is important for the researcher to have a plan for completing this research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The plan for this research is to further understand the lived experiences of women serving in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States through the co-creation of meaning. Merriam (2002) alleged the "key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (p. 3). Regarding this research, the "individuals" refer to women serving in the SWA role, and "their world" refers to the world of college athletics.

Merriam (2002) also suggested that the researcher in any study is the "primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (p. 4). Because gaining understanding and further insight into the lived experiences of women serving in the SWA role is the primary goal of this research. a phenomenological design is the most fitting for this study. Phenomenology attempts to capture the essence of the lived experiences of humans (Lichtman, 2013). Lichtman (2013) posited, "the purpose of phenomenology is to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of

individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon" (p. 83). As this study examines the perception of power in women serving in the SWA role, phenomenology is the most beneficial design style to capture the essence of the SWA experience.

Conceptual Framework

This study's phenomenological design, which aims to better understand the essence of the SWA experience, will be viewed through the lens of a conceptual framework involving Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to athletics and Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept of credibility and perceived power. These concepts will aid in the guidance of the interview and data collection processes.

Connell (1987, 1995) first conceptualized hegemonic masculinity as a "gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Connell's (1987, 1995) work aimed to begin exploring societal norms that accepted women as being subordinate, or inferior, to men in most ways. Connell (1987, 1995) found that "male" appeared to be the standard and "female" was considered to be the other. Whisenant et al.'s (2002) work built from Connell's (1987, 1995, 2005) research on hegemonic masculinity and explored the concept in the realm of athletics. Although their work focused specifically on the advancement of athletic directors, their findings can be broadly applied to the focus of this study: perceived power among women serving in the SWA role.

Nesler et al.'s (1993) examined "the effect of credibility on the perceptions of power of a source" (p. 1409). Their findings suggested that there is a direct relationship between credibility and perception of power within a person, especially in a social capacity (Nesler et al., 1993). It is important to examine credibility and the perceived power of the woman serving in SWA role in

an effort to further make meaning of their experiences in the predominantly masculine field that is college athletics. This examination allows us to delve into an aspect of the lived experiences of women serving in the SWA designation.

Phenomenology

Although phenomenology has been described as "radical" at times, its existence dates as far back as the 18th century (Moran, 2002). For the purposes of this study, however, we relied on Edmund Husserl's version of phenomenology as "descriptive psychology" (Moran, 2002, p. 7). Husserl speculated that "experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). This foundational principle of Husserl's phenomenology was grounded in the fact that he believed that "practical concerns, folk assumptions, and [a] smattering of scientific knowledge all got in the way of a pure consideration of experience as it is given to us" (Moran, 2002, p. 11). In reference to this study the practical concerns surrounding the SWA designation must be completely expelled in order to truly understand the essence of the SWA experience.

When it comes to examining the lived experiences of SWAs through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and credibility and perceived power, phenomenology is the best option to capture the essence of the experience. Merriam (2002) stated that "phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer" (p. 4). The statement helps in describing how this research must work in order to be effective. All stigmas and knowledge of the SWA role as we know it today must be abandoned, in some sense, as the data is collected in an effort to determine the true perception of power of women serving

in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. Merriam (2002) asserted that for phenomenology to be a successful research design, "explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within" (p. 4). This again suggests that preconceived notions about the SWA designation must be set aside to truly gain understanding and insight.

Research Context

This study aimed to capture the essence of the self-perception of the SWA experience in women serving in the role. In particular, the research focuses on the experiences of women serving as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. As a reminder, NCAA Division I represents the top level of membership competition within NCAA intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, 2021b). On average, NCAA Division I institutions offer the most available athletic scholarships to student-athletes, enroll the most students in the overall student population, and tend to manage the largest athletic department budgets in any NCAA division (NCAA, 2021b).

In an effort to provide consistent results, this study focused solely on women serving in the SWA designation at the Division I level. This is due in large part to the findings of the NCAA's (2018b) report on the "Optimization of the Senior Woman Administrator," which alleged inconsistencies in experiences of women serving in the SWA designation at different NCAA levels (I, II, and III).

Participants

Participants of this study needed to meet the following criteria in order to participate: a) be a female athletic administrator currently serving in the SWA role, c) work at an NCAA Division I institution in the United States, and d) have served as SWA for at least two years prior

to start of this study. Serving in the designation for two years allowed enough time for the participant to have gathered a general understanding of the SWA designation at their specific institution, as well as a sense of the value of the role in the overall hierarchy of NCAA athletics. For context, there are 350 Division I institutions in the United States. NCAA Division I is made up of two main football subdivisions: the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), which is the highest level of collegiate football, and the Football Champion Subdivision (FCS), which is the second-highest level of college football. There are 131 institutions competing at the FBS level and 130 competing at the FCS level.

It is important to note that there are also various conference affiliations within the aforementioned levels. To protect the anonymity of participants, conferences were categorized into two affiliations: Power 5 (P5) and Non-Power 5 (Non-P5). All of the P5 conferences (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference (SEC)) are part of the FBS, receive the highest multimedia rights deals, are highly commercialized, and have the highest operating budgets of all NCAA Division I institutions (Reedy, 2022).

Participants varied in terms of age (from 33 to 58), years served (from 2.5 years to 25 years), race, highest level of education attained (i.e. bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees), geographic location, and institution size (i.e. P5, FBS, or FCS). Overall, eight participants (*N*=8*)* took part in this study. Information on recruitment and selection is explained in the following sections.

When it comes to conducting qualitative, phenomenological research, there is no "magic" number of participants that provides an appropriate and effective sample size for understanding a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The key to success is to find an adequate number of participants

that allows for the essence of the phenomenon to be captured, while avoiding saturation of data (Siedman, 2013). Siedman (2013) referred to a saturated study as one in which the researcher begins to hear the same information over and over again without gaining any new insights into the phenomenon. Creswell (2014) suggested a sample size of at least six for studies that employ phenomenology as a basis for examination.

This study utilized purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods to gain participants. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to gain participants by finding those who meet the study's criteria (e.g. currently serving in the SWA role, work at an NCAA Division I institution in the United States, have served as SWA for at least two years prior to start of the study). Purposeful sampling was an appropriate sampling method for this study because of its key intentions as described by Ritchie et al. (2014): a) "to ensure that all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered" and b) to ensure that among participants "enough diversity is included so that the impact of the characteristic concerned can be explored" (p. 113). The combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling assisted the researcher in gaining an appropriate number of participants to satisfy the desired outcomes of data collection previously described by Ritchie et al. (2014).

For this research, the researcher utilized the recruitment correspondence email outlined in Appendix A to reach out to potential participants. The researcher was able to recruit the desired number of participants (between six and ten) using a combination of purposeful sampling within her professional network and with the help of snowball sampling. Initially two participants who fit the criteria within the researcher's professional network were contacted via email using the correspondence outlined in Appendix A. They both agreed and proceeded to fill out the pre-interview survey. Additionally, 20 other women who were recommended by others were

contacted via email using the correspondence outlined in Appendix A and asked to participate. Finally, a contact in the researcher's network posted to Twitter on the researcher's behalf and garnered interest from three participants. Ultimately, nine women completed the pre-interview survey. All nine were contacted via email using the correspondence outlined in Appendix B to participate in the study and of those eight women replied to confirm their participation.

To ensure diversity in this sample, the researcher utilized a pre-interview survey (Appendix C) to gather general demographic information on participants in initial email correspondence. In doing so, the researcher was able to identify participants with varying SWA experiences to capture the full phenomenon. The pre-interview survey (Appendix D) outlines general demographic information and includes questions about the length of time served as an SWA. By utilizing this pre-interview survey, the researcher was able to identify participants of various races/ethnicities, ages, and years of service (e.g. participants who have served as an SWA for two years and participants who have served as an SWA for ten or more years). This amount of diversity in the sample aligned well with the purposeful sampling intentions outlined above by Ritchie et al. (2014).

As previously mentioned, the study gained eight participants overall. This amount of participants was sufficient according to Creswell's (2014) earlier mentioned recommendations, and the researcher reached a point of saturation by the time the eighth participant was interviewed. The eight participants provided the researcher with a plethora of perspectives on the SWA designation and the lived experiences of the women who serve in it. Prior to beginning each interview, participants were informed of their rights and provided verbal consent to participle in the study. Table 1 below provides demographic information (e.g. age, years served,

education, institution size, and geographic location) of each of the research participants, as well as the pseudonyms they chose for themselves.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	**Race**	**Age**	**Years Served as SWA**	**FBS or FCS**	**Conference Size**	**Geographic Location**
Cheryl	Caucasian	51	8.5	FBS	Non-P5	Northeast
Janet	Caucasian	50	25	FBS	P5	Midwest
Jamie	African-American	41	5	FBS	P5	Midwest
Beach Girl	African-American	42	9	FBS	P5	South
Jenna	African-American	38	3	FBS	Non-P5	Midwest
Barbara	African-American	40	9	FBS	P5	South
Emily Jones	Caucasian	33	2.5	FCS	Non-P5	South
Twin	Caucasian	58	6	FBS	P5	Midwest

Data Collection

While there are a variety of appropriate data collection techniques in qualitative data, interviews and various observations are some of the most widely used methods (Creswell, 2014;

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because the qualitative methodology of this study is phenomenology, which aimed to capture the essence of an experience, data were collected for this study in the form of individual interviews. The study employed semi-structured interviews held via Zoom to allow interviewees the ability to offer additional insights outside of the outlined interview questions. Semi-structured interviews are often utilized in qualitative data as a means of "open[ing] up new possibilities in understanding complicated phenomena often accepted as unproblematic" (Galletta, 2013, p. 2).

Interviews

Keeping in mind Lichtman's (2013) concept of interviewing as "conversation with a purpose" (p. 189) and Galletta's (2013) suggestion that semi-structured interviews allow space for stories to unfold, the interviews were conducted in a way that allowed the researcher and the participants to work together to co-create meaning during the process. This style of interview also allowed the researcher to deviate from the set of interview questions if the participant brought up a point that needed to be clarified or explored further. As a reminder, the interviews were completed through a phenomenological lens in order to capture the essence of the experience of women who serve as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States.

Participants were interviewed one time via Zoom and were re-contacted via email to confirm accuracy of data collected during the member check period of data analysis. The interviews took place via Zoom so that the researcher could also capture the body language and/or facial expressions of participants as they answered questions. The interviews ranged from 22 to 43 minutes in length. The interview guide (Appendix D) included questions about the participant's demographics and current job duties, as well as open-ended questions about her perception of the power associated with the SWA designation, her perception of their decision-

making power within the role, her perception of the overall value of the SWA designation, and her overall experience of serving in the SWA role at their respective institutions.

As previously stated, once participants were selected for the study, they were guided to complete the pre-interview survey (Appendix C) online. Once completed, the researcher contacted them using the correspondence outlined in Appendix B to confirm their interest in participating and to provide a calendar link (via Calendly) so that participants could find a date/time that fit their schedule to complete the interview with the researcher. The interviews were recorded on Zoom and stored on the researcher's university Box drive, an online cloud storing software. Following the completion of each interview, the researcher outsourced a transcription service for each interview to be transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process by which the researcher makes meaning from the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Miles et al. (2014) advised the importance of analyzing data as it is collected, rather than collecting all data and then analyzing. This, they alleged, allows the researcher to "cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better, data" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 70). During the interviews for this research, the researcher kept handwritten notes to track and summarize key points from each participant. Additionally, full notes were typed out following the completion of each interview and the key points were highlighted before being moved into spreadsheet format. In the spreadsheet, the researcher was able to organize and categorize key points into the overarching themes outlined in the Chapter 4. The following paragraphs illustrate the researcher's methods for data analysis.

Thematic Analysis

As data in this study were collected and concurrently analyzed, the researcher utilized thematic analysis to create meaning. In their article, "Techniques to Identify Themes," Ryan and Bernard (2003) outlined several tasks for thematically analyzing text: "(1) discovering themes and subthemes, (2) winnowing themes to a manageable few (i.e. deciding which themes are important in any project), (3) building hierarchies of themes or code books, and (4) linking themes into theoretical models" (p. 85). For the purposes of this study's data analysis, the tasks of "discovering themes and subthemes" and "winnowing themes to a manageable few" proved most helpful (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 85). Identifying and narrowing down the recurring themes that appeared throughout the data collection process perfectly describes what the thematic analysis process looked like as it relates to this research.

Ryan and Bernard (2003) posited that themes can be deduced from a combination of the data and from the researcher's "prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under a study" (p. 88). The concurrent analysis depicted by Miles et al. (2014) is particularly important during the thematic analysis process, as Ryan and Bernard (2003) pointed out that it is difficult to predict all the themes that may appear throughout the data. In this study, the researcher concurrently collected and thematically analyzed data in order to identify major themes throughout the interview data, which were utilized to aid in narrative analysis.

As previously mentioned, once notes and transcriptions were completed for each interview, the researcher identified four to five key themes for each participant in a spreadsheet. Once all interviews were completed and all themes were in the spreadsheet, the researcher took a tally of the ones that appeared most often. Those appearing in six or more (of eight) interviews made up the key, overarching themes from this research. Once this process was complete, the

researcher reached back out to participants via email using the correspondence outlined in Appendix E to ensure accuracy of the overarching themes as it related to their experience as SWA.

Narrative Analysis

After identifying themes throughout the interview data, narrative analysis was utilized to aid the research in moving from thematic data into the form of a story. The use of narrative analysis assisted in the data interpretation process and helped to find meaning throughout the data that is collected and to "flirt with the data" (Kim, 2015). Kim (2015) suggested flirtation as a necessary part of data analysis, as it "asks us to undo our commitment to what we already know and question its legitimacy" (p. 187). Kim's (2015) approach to data analysis allowed for the element of surprise and aligns well with Ryan and Bernard's (2003) point that there is no way to anticipate all the themes that may emerge from the data.

Kim (2015) also stated that "narrative inquiry is a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand the human phenomena and human existence" (p. 190). By utilizing thematic analysis as an initial "analysis episode" before turning to narrative analysis, the researcher had opportunity to do precisely that: move the data into the form of a story to better describe the phenomenon that is the SWA designation. Narrative analysis of the thematic data helped to provide a more coherent understanding of the lived experiences of women serving in the SWA role and their perception of power.

Ethical Concerns

This study utilized human participants, and the researcher understands the need for confidentiality due to what could be sensitive information gathered during interviews. The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any data

collection, and confidentiality of participant responses was respected throughout the data collection process.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative data is occasionally subject to more criticism and scrutiny surrounding researcher bias than other types of research (Gunawan, 2015; Shenton, 2004). One way to combat this criticism and scrutiny bias is to confirm the validity of the research by establishing trustworthiness. In the following sections, information on researcher bias and the methods this study will employ to ensure trustworthiness are discussed in detail.

Researcher Subjectivity and Assumptions. Creswell (2014) suggests qualitative researchers include written information that addresses researcher bias within the study. Merriam (2002) stated that a human is the primary instrument of qualitative research. Because of this, it is important for a researcher to first acknowledge their biases regarding the study in order to establish credibility and ensure trustworthiness.

This research, perception of power among women serving as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States, is of great interest to the researcher. The researcher is a female, and a former NCAA Division I student-athlete, as well as a nine-year veteran who worked in the field of higher education and college athletics, albeit not as an SWA. As a student-athlete, the researcher came to know what the SWA designation stood for, but throughout her professional experiences has become increasingly more aware of the role and some of the intricacies that surround it.

Being a woman in the male-dominated world of athletics – both as a student-athlete and as a working professional – has allowed the researcher to gain unique perspectives and insights on what it is like to compete and work in the field. The researcher has experienced firsthand

several of the concepts outlined in the framework of this research (e.g. hegemonic masculinity, credibility and perceived power, and homologous reproduction) during her time working and competing at the NCAA Division I level.

While these experiences have led the researcher to form assumptions and preconceived notions about the SWA experience, they also provided a level of expertise and understanding that may not be found elsewhere. In the following section, methods to aid in the process of establishing trustworthiness and credibility of the research are addressed in detail.

Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) pointed out that ensuring credibility is crucial to establishing trustworthiness for qualitative researchers. Shenton (2004) outlined several requirements for qualitative researchers to foster assurance of the trustworthiness of their research. Of those Shenton (2004) listed, these are the most relevant to this study:

a. "The adoption of research methods well established both in qualitative investigation in general and in information science in particular;
b. the development of an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations before the first data collection dialogues takes place;
c. triangulation;
d. peer scrutiny of the research project; and
e. member checks" (pp. 64-69).

We have established that this research will utilize a phenomenological design to capture the essence of the phenomenon that is the SWA designation at NCAA Division I institutions. As such, this study has done well to adopt "research methods well established in qualitative investigation in general and in information science" per Shenton's (2004, p. 64-69) suggestion.

Additionally, as outlined in the previous section, the researcher has nine years of experience working in college athletics and higher education. This has allowed her to develop a particular level of familiarity with the organization of college athletic departments, and therefore, women who work as SWA's at NCAA Division I institutions.

In addition to sound research methods and familiarity of the subject, the researcher utilized triangulation, which Shenton (2004) described in one form as involving "the use of a wide range of informants" (p. 66). This will provide the researcher with a variety of insights and experiences from several women serving in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions. Triangulation is also outlined as a method for ensuring credibility, which is outlined by Tracy (2010) as a "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. Tracy (2010) posits that credibility in qualitative research is "achieved through practices including thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality and partiality" (p. 843). In particular, Tracy (2010) states that when two or more sources or frameworks are used in research to come up with similar conclusions, triangulation, and therefore credibility, have been achieved.

Peer feedback from participants and colleagues was accepted throughout the data collection process. Shenton (2004) describes peer feedback as a means of gaining fresh perspectives from peers or colleagues that can provide a more subjective view on the topic. For the purposes of this research, peers were defined as interview participants and other individuals who have worked in higher education for five or more years and who have experience working with or as an SWA at an NCAA Division I institution. Shenton (2004) goes on to suggest that this method of establishing trustworthiness can, in some cases, assist the researcher in developing "a greater explanation of the research design" (p. 67), thus strengthening the findings of the research.

Finally, members checks were utilized. Member checks, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) note as the most important way to establish credibility, involve study participants verifying the data and words collected by the researcher throughout the interview process (Shenton, 2004). Tracy (2010) also outlines member reflections, also known as member checks, as a method for establishing credibility. In this study, member checks happened during the interview process and once the researcher has completed data analysis. Following the completion of data analysis, the researcher shared summarized findings with interview participants and confirmed their experiences aligned with the findings.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the study's intended research design and methodology, as well as information on data collection and analysis, ethical concerns, and trustworthiness. The study used a qualitative phenomenological approach, which includes semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Thematic analysis and narrative analysis will be utilized to interpret and make meaning out of the data collected. Regarding trustworthiness and validity of the study, the researcher outlines personal experiences related to the research, and outlined the following tactics to establish credibility and trustworthiness during the research process: adopting appropriate research methods, developing a familiarity with the culture of college athletics, triangulation, peer feedback, and member checks.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was for the researcher to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of women serving in the Senior Woman Administrator (SWA) designation at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. To achieve this purpose, semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method in this phenomenological design. Participants took part in one main interview ranging in times from 22 minutes to 43 minutes. As previously stated, the interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix D). Because of the semi-structured design, all participants were asked the same set of questions, but there was room for follow-up questions when necessary. Follow-up questions provided the researcher and participant an opportunity to co-create meaning throughout conversation, which helped the researcher to further understand the lived experiences of participants as it relates to serving as SWA.

Concurrent analysis was utilized following each interview, as the researcher meticulously reviewed handwritten notes and noted key highlights from conversation. Additionally, during the initial review process, themes were identified from each conversation to begin a comparison of participant experiences. Following the main interview, the researcher reached back out to participants via email to share the three overarching themes and ensure they still aligned with what participants believe to be their experience. This email follow-up served as a form of member checking.

Because of its exploratory, qualitative design, phenomenology was the selected methodology chosen for this research. When it comes to examining the lived experiences of

SWAs through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and credibility and perceived power, phenomenology is the best option to capture the essence of the experience. Merriam (2002) referred to phenomenology as being best "understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer" (p. 4). Merriam's ideas around phenomenology translate well to the purpose of this study, which was to understand the lived experiences of women serving as SWA at Division I institutions.

Through interviews, member checks with participants, and analysis, the researcher gathered useful data. As previously mentioned, concurrent analysis was utilized when following each interview, the researcher reviewed interview notes and identified key highlights. This process allowed the researcher to summarize main points from each conversation while the information was fresh. Additionally, the interview notes were reviewed multiple times during the theming process to ensure that the researcher's initial summaries matched the words of the participants. As mentioned in Chapter 3, there are several ways to thematically analyze text. For the purposes of this study, Ryan and Bernard's (2003) tasks of 1) discovering themes and subthemes and 2) winnowing themes to a manageable few were utilized to make sense of the data. During the review of interview notes, the researcher highlighted words and phrases that were frequently used by participants when describing their experiences as SWAs.

This chapter will present the findings of this study. The following paragraphs will briefly reiterate the coding and theming process, as well as sharing the themes that emerged throughout the data analysis. Additionally, this chapter will also share direct quotes from participants that exhibit the following themes: 1) The Designation for Representation, 2) Consistently

Inconsistent, and 3) Inherent Power. These quotes are woven together into a narrative that illustrates the phenomena that is the SWA designation at the NCAA Division I level. Finally, a summary is shared to prepare the reader for the final chapter, which includes a discussion on findings, implications for future research, and concluding remarks.

Emerged Themes

As discussed in Chapter 3, thematic analysis was utilized to capture overarching themes in this research. The data was analyzed concurrently, as interviews were completed, through time-stamped hand-written notes to mark important and recurring words or phrases used by participants. Additionally, each interview transcript was reviewed and coded to identify exact words and phrases, rather than hand-written summaries, used by participants. These words and phrases were then organized into themes. As suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), as themes were discovered they were also narrowed into a manageable amount of smaller, but more overarching, categories. Ultimately, these themes were deduced from a combination of the words and phrases used by the participants *and* from the researcher's prior understanding of the phenomenon.

Because the researcher had a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that is the SWA designation, member checks were utilized as a means of ensuring accuracy of preconceived notions and the identified emerged themes. The member check was completed in the form of an email and provided participants with a description of the overarching themes identified throughout the interview process. The email correspondence is outlined in Appendix E. All eight participants replied and stated the themes accurately captured the essence of their experience. The following themes emerged as a result of the participants' interviews: 1) The Designation for Representation, 2) Consistently Inconsistent, and 3) Inherent Power.

Additionally, nine subthemes were identified. The breakdown of themes and subthemes can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Emerged Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes
1. The Designation for Representation
a. Diversity of Thought
b. If She Can See It, She Can Be It
c. Double-Edged Sword
2. Consistently Inconsistent
a. Institutional Variation
b. Leadership Matters
c. Misperceptions
3. Inherent Power
a. A Seat at the Table
b. Credibility
c. Potential for Pigeonholing

Theme 1: The Designation for Representation

The first theme, The Designation for Representation, is a depiction of exact verbiage used by almost every interview participant. The theme also outlines three subthemes mentioned frequently throughout conversation, where participants discussed the importance of diversity of thought, representation, and the pros and cons of the designation. The subtheme "Diversity of

Thought" refers to comments made about being designated as a woman leader in a male-dominated field and able to provide alternative perspectives for Athletic Directors and/or University Presidents. Additionally, the "If She Can See It, She Can Be It" subtheme is based on assumptions that female student-athletes and entry- to mid-level employees may aspire to become an SWA someday. Finally, the "Double-Edged Sword" subtheme is based on comments that illustrate the necessity of the designation as well as its downsides. One participant, Jamie, a five-year veteran at a P5 institution, laid out why representation is important in athletic departments well and shared:

> I think the biggest thing is the visibility of the role, and physically having, you know, a woman that's in leadership role [be] a part of the that leadership team and structure. I think there's no doubt. You can't put a value on that because I think it helps enforce your coaches, male, female, student-athletes, male, female, and it just lets people know that it's okay for women to lead and be leaders.

This theme does well to lay a foundation of understanding for one of the main ways participants discussed the designation in conversation.

Diversity of Thought

While several participants outlined the importance of "diversity of thought," two participants mentioned it verbatim. They described it as a key reason why the SWA designation was an important staple of the NCAA ecosystem, as well as a key way that the designation added value to their respective institutions. When reflecting on this, participants discussed the importance of a visible presence of women in leadership roles in athletic departments as well as being able to offer diverse perspectives in those roles. In one example, Beach Girl, a nine-year veteran at a P5 school, discussed how just being "in the room" is a big piece of representation:

> [One success is just] being able to be in the room and sit at the table. I think that's a success in itself. When, historically, women haven't necessarily been at those tables. And then just being really intentional about having the SWA voice, which we know provides diversity of thought at the table. And the same is true for the [conference level] and I keep saying the [conference] just because I feel like that's where a lot of policies happen and legislative changes. So having a voice in that room makes a big difference.

When considering some of the impact the designation has had on her career trajectory, Beach Girl went on to explain more on the historical context of the SWA designation:

> I understand, you know, 30 to 40 years ago, when it was first introduced, [maybe] 50 years ago… [the designation] was something to be able to provide more diversity of thought at the table and require that there's at least a woman's voice at the table and [her] perspective is being heard. That's not necessarily the case right now. So maybe there's a chance to reevaluate the purpose of the SWA designation and make sure that it's being used the way it's intended.

Similar to Beach Girl, Cheryl, who has served as an SWA at multiple non-P5 FBS schools over the course of eight and a half years, described the importance of being able to offer alternative viewpoints to the athletic director she works for:

> Hopefully, you'll will have a good perspective on things so that you can offer [and you're] kind of a backup to your AD (athletic director) but also have a different perspective than your AD because … everybody kind of perceives things differently based on who they are. I can offer a little bit of a different perspective for him, too.

In another example, Twin, who has served as SWA for six years at one P5 institution, shared her thoughts on why the designation brings value as well as potential leadership challenges:

> I think that [the designation provides] diversity of thought. I've said that before, [but] I just think it's a different voice. I think the challenge becomes if you're not in a situation like I am [in terms of having] support of an [athletic director], right, [you may think] is just this token? [Because] everybody has to have [the designation]. And so, I would say my value is not necessarily my SWA designation, my value is my [other title], and encompassing all the [duties] that I bring together for that, so [the designation] is just one piece of it.

Barbara, who has served as SWA at P5 and non-P5 FBS schools over the course of nine years, had similar sentiments about the designation and its ability to add diversity of thought to executive-level leadership in college athletics and said:

> I think the benefits of the SWA designation [are] the visibility of being a female on executive staff and [being] somebody who's in a position to make decisions. I think another positive is that like there's, through having this designation, kind of a mandate of information being funneled through that may not otherwise be funneled through because people would not be obligated to do it [without the designation]. And then just the ability to be able to utilize the designation for good, right? When it comes to advocating for student-athletes, student-athletes' welfare, infrastructure, campus conversations… it helps to push the needle and push the people that wouldn't otherwise feel pushed or pressured [if the designation didn't exist].

These examples do well to provide a foundational understanding of how the SWA designation leads to greater representation of women in leadership roles in athletics *and* how those women are able to provide diversity in thought in the executive-level capacities they are asked to serve in.

If She Can See It, She Can Be It

The second subtheme identified under the first emerged theme, "The Designation for Representation," is "If She Can See It, She Can Be It." This subtheme shares the thoughts of interview participants as it relates to the SWA designation's value as an aspirational position for female student-athletes and entry- to mid-level female employees in NCAA Division I athletic departments. For student-athletes in particular, Jamie shared that the SWA designation helps female student-athletes to realize there are other jobs in athletics besides coaching that they can strive for. She said:

> For the student athletes, I think [the designation is] really important because it shows that, you know, these are jobs that they can aspire to, as well. Like I always say that, you know, you have to make the students know there's nothing wrong with coaching, but that's not the only job that they can do in athletics. And for them to see these, like, how many of them really know that these are jobs that they can do? That there are administrative things that they can do after they're done with sport? So, I think having a woman in a leadership – a high leadership – position like this helps them to know, like, those are things that they could aspire to as well.

Cheryl's sentiments on the SWA designation as an aspirational role for female student-athletes echoed that of Jamie, and she stated:

> [Historically] in certain athletic departments, you wouldn't see a female in a position of authority or on an executive team at all. So, I think it adds value so that your student-athletes and your staff can see that there's someone in that role as a role model in some ways. So, "if she can see it, she could be it" kind of thing. I think it adds value in that way.

In an alternate view, several participants shared that the visibility and representation of women serving as SWA is equally important for entry- and mid-level female staff members aspiring to become leaders in athletics. Emily Jones, who has served as SWA at an FCS school for two and a half years, went so far as to call the designation a "north star" for her early on in her career:

> I think previously, I always wanted to be an SWA, and that was kind of like a career goal. Whenever anyone would ask me what I wanted to do, I eventually wanted to be an SWA. So, I think it impacted [my career trajectory] from that standpoint of, like, giving me kind of like a North Star that I was shooting for.

She went on to explain that because she achieved her goal of becoming the highest-ranking female in an athletic department so early on in her career, it led to some personal confusion:

> I was named SWA when I was 30. And so, it was just like, now what? Now what do I want to do? What's my next goal? Because I definitely was not anticipating that would happen at that age – especially, like, at the Division I level.

Eventually, she shared that even being named SWA so young, she was able to look at more veteran SWAs as role models for herself in the role:

> I think getting into it [that way] gave me something that I wanted to be, something that I could shoot for. It gave me people to look up to, and immediately respect. From just their role as SWA, whether that's, like, within institutions that I've worked for, or just even through, like, [the organization] Women Leaders [in College Sport] and things like that. Just seeing those women and how they've been successful that hold that that designation [has impacted my career trajectory].

Jenna, who has served as SWA at a non-P5, non-football school for nearly three years, shared similar thoughts regarding young professionals striving to become SWAs:

> I think [the designation] can be important as a young professional. I think it's an important thing that you can strive for.

She went on to explain that even if you've already achieved the goal of becoming an SWA, you can still take advantage of what the role offers:

> I think that as a person that has it, it's good to take advantage of the experiences that it can bring you and [even if] that's merely learning how to ask for things. I really needed to understand how to do budgeting and finance and what that looks like from an entire department standpoint, so I said, "hey, can I really get immersed in this somehow?" And then all of a sudden, I was the CFO, and I was like, I didn't mean that [laughing]. I think it's important to take advantage of some of the things that having the designation [does]. [It] made it a little bit easier to ask [for budgeting and finance responsibilities] because I think that there is some respectability that comes with [the designation] and that the athletic director trusted me enough to be able to say, "okay, you're ready for this" or "I can teach you this."

Similar to the importance of being able to provide diversity of thought as SWA, the participants described the visible representation as being of equal importance for current and future generations of women in leadership roles in athletics. The SWA designation has had a clear aspirational impact on the career trajectory of women working in college athletics.

Although it's clear the designation has had positive impacts in terms of representation and aspirational goals, participants also described double-edged sword-like scenarios where it felt necessary and unnecessary at the same time. As the old adage goes, "you can't live with it, and you can't live without it." The next subtheme shares more on that.

Double-Edged Sword

The third subtheme identified under the first emerged theme, "The Designation for Representation," is "Double-Edged Sword." This subtheme outlines the experiences of interview participants as it relates to whether or not they felt the SWA designation was necessary for them to do their job. Cheryl shared her feelings about the SWA designation and described some pros and cons of having it. She said:

> I don't think [the designation is] necessary to complete any of [my job] duties… I've been debating this a lot because of the research that I've been doing, too… People don't think it's necessary, and I still think it's a necessary designation because I think that there's just a lot of people who would never hire a female [on their senior staff], if given the choice. I've chosen to be at institutions that reside in very metropolitan areas that are pretty…that they can't really *not* have a diverse senior staff, but I think there's a lot of schools that... like I said, if given the choice they would go without [hiring women] with no problem.

Cheryl went on to explain that while she feels the designation is a necessity in terms of ensuring women are hired into executive leadership roles in athletic departments, she also felt the designation directly afforded her some of the opportunities she's had in her career.

> I think it helps and hurts, right? I think it helps because, but for that designation sometimes I don't know that I would be in the conversation for an [athletic director] role because people still see it as the highest-ranking female official in the athletics department. Which means they know that when you have that designation that you've been exposed to all these different things.

As she reflected on her experiences, she circled back to external perceptions and understandings of the designation and what it might mean during a hiring process:

> By the same token, I think people…[university] president-wise…I think they see it as you're not the head person. You haven't been in the head role. Think about it this way, someone pointed out to me this way: For your entire career as an athletics department employee, you're applying to jobs with people who have done what you do. The one time you're trying to obtain the highest position you can (the athletic director role), you're applying for a job with people [on campus, like university presidents and trustees] who are going to review it that have no idea what you've done for your entire career. And it's like, how you do you describe to someone that you are the highest-ranking senior woman? Like a college president, a provost, a legal counsel – they may or may not have any concept of what you have done in your career and so that title could hurt or it could help – it just depends.

Janet, a 25-year veteran currently serving as SWA at an FBS, P5 school, also reflected on some pros and cons the SWA designation has had throughout the course of her career. She stated:

> I don't think [the designation] is necessary to complete any of those. I think that the SWA title was put in play to be sure that people were paying attention to the makeup of their executive groups.

Like Cheryl, Janet went on to discuss some of the opportunities she'd had throughout her career as a result of having the designation:

> Early on in my career at the age of 25… Having the SWA title changed everything for me because it absolutely got me into… it got me into a conference office, you know, meetings; it got me into NCAA convention meetings – not just in, but I was part of the voting, a part of the voting structure, the governance structure. It gave me opportunities to network with individuals I would never have seen before. And it gave me a level of

> authority within the athletics department and then, therefore, within the conference office, and at the national level that I wouldn't have had before. So as much as I get frustrated with the SWA title now sometimes… I value it because I know what it is done for me over my career. It's just opened opportunities for me to get my foot in the door in places that I might not have been able to if I was just another associate or senior associate or whatever, you know, within the athletics department. It was almost, you know, forced upon people and to my benefit, right? So, I think that those…there have been some really wonderful successes there.

Jamie echoed Cheryl and Janet's thoughts regarding the necessity of the designation, and said:

> I do think the designation is still necessary, because I don't know if you would have women overseeing some of the things that we do oversee, and there's *still* not enough women in the business we know that. So, I don't think without it that there would be the reason to continue to hire some women in some roles. But, also, I don't know if we've seen growth in women in athletic administration just left to it's own. I don't think people would do that. Maybe I'm.. that's a pessimistic view of the hiring practices, but that's what I think.

Similarly, Jenna expressed that while she didn't feel the designation was necessary for her to complete her job duties, she did see value in terms of garnering respect:

> I don't think [the designation] is necessary for me to complete my job duties. I don't think it's necessary to like get the job done. Like whether I'm the SWA or not, in my mind, shouldn't affect how I interface with my students and staff. Like that shouldn't be it, but....I do think that the SWA designation is important to gain respect in certain rooms so that people understand that you're not just only, like, no good words are coming to my

> head, but like so that people understand that you're not just somebody that's like a seat filler. I actually understand and can relate all of these things back to Title IX, gender equity, all of the things that are important to keep an athletic department and a university out of the crosshairs of the NCAA and the federal government.

When asked whether she felt the SWA designation was necessary for her to complete her job duties, Barbara shared that it wasn't necessarily important for her job on campus, but the designation provides the most value as a part of the NCAA ecosystem:

> No, I don't think it's necessary to complete my job duties, but I think it's necessary in the NCAA athletics ecosystem… It's a greater concept of the microcosm on a campus, right? Like the SWA having spaces in rooms at the NCAA level, to provide a voice for others. And it's a lot to carry. But the majority of the time, I mean, we're automatically a minority being women in that position, but most of the time, we're gonna have double minorities along whatever spectrum or intersection you might find within that space, and so I think it's important to continue to amplify the SWA position, having females and spaces in places where really high-level decisions are made. Because the more diverse a room can be, the more opportunity there is to make holistic decisions and really vet decisions that are being considered. And so that's why I think it's important to the NCAA structure is because not only does it help with diversifying rooms and spaces on campus, but it's also a space where we have to have a voice in the NCAA infrastructure, committees, all of those things that is also really helpful – not utilized as much as it could be, but helpful.

Barbara also shared that while she's grateful for what the designation has done for women in leadership roles so far, she also feels like there is room to grow. She stated:

> I mean, I'm grateful for the opportunities that I've had and the doors that have been opened. For me, while having the SWA designation has brought us a long way, I still think that there's room for evolution for that position, and for the opportunities within that position, that are being underutilized. And so, you know, there's still room for growth. We've come a long way, but there's still a really long way to go. But I'm grateful for the opportunities, as a minority, to be able to have access to spaces in places that I probably wouldn't have if I weren't [the SWA].

Above all, the participants outlined the SWA designation as being both unnecessary to complete their job duties on their respective campuses, but also necessary in terms of garnering respect and being hired in the first place. Their sentiments illustrated a "double-edged sword" and provide good context for some of the confusion that surrounds the role, which we'll discuss more in depth in the next overarching theme section.

Theme 2: Consistently Inconsistent

The second theme, Consistently Inconsistent, explains some of the inconsistencies experienced by participants on their respective campuses. These inconsistences are described in a variety of capacities, including institution size or division (FCS vs. FBS), conference (P5 vs. non-P5), athletic director leadership style, and internal and external misperceptions about the designation. This second overarching theme also outlines three subthemes mentioned consistently throughout the interviews: 1) Institutional Variation, 2) Leadership Matters, and 3) Misperceptions.

The subtheme "Institutional Variation" refers to comments made about differing experiences at different sized institutions – be it divisional differences at the NCAA level (DI, DII, DIII), football subdivision level (FBS vs. FCS), or differences in conference size (P5 vs.

non-P5). Participants discussed these differences as adding to the confusion and inconsistency that surrounds the SWA designation.

The "Leadership Matters" subtheme refers to the leadership of the athletic director under which the SWA serves. Participants shared their experiences, some positive, some negative, about working under athletic directors of varying backgrounds (male, female, minority, first-time, etc.). As conversations unfolded, participants shared their areas of oversight as related to their main title (e.g. Associate Athletic Director, Deputy Athletic Director, etc.) as well as their SWA designation.

Finally, the "Misperceptions" subtheme surfaced as participants shared some of the internal and external misperceptions they have faced regarding the SWA designation. Internally and externally, participants described the SWA designation as being seen to only oversee women's sports or gender equity. Some also disclosed that they leave out the SWA designation when introducing themselves at certain events (e.g. "My name is Emily Jones, and I serve as Associate Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Enrichment; as opposed to "My name is Emily Jones, and I serve as SWA and Associate Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Enrichment).

Institutional Variation

In an attempt to understand more about the experiences of women serving in the SWA designation, data in the "Institutional Variation" subtheme helped the researcher to understand how environments influence and impact their experiences. Divisional differences, institution size, and conference affiliation all have a role to play when it comes to resource allocation in college athletics. Typically, the more resources a school has, the more staff they have, and therefore, the more (or less) oversight an SWA has as a part of her job duties. While institution and conference size play a role in the variation of experiences for women serving as SWA, one

major inconsistency identified from data participants shared was differences in their main title, which can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Variation in On-Campus Title

Pseudonym	Football Subdivision & Conference	Title
Cheryl	FBS, non-P5	Executive Senior Associate Athletic Director
Janet	FBS, P5	Deputy Director of Athletics for Administration & Policy
Jamie	FBS, P5	Executive Associate Athletic Director
Jenna	Non-football, non-P5	Interim AD (previously Deputy Athletic Director, Chief Operating Officer)
Beach Girl	FBS, P5	Deputy Athletic Director for Internal Affairs
Barbara	FBS, P5	Executive Senior Associate Athletic Director
Emily Jones	FCS, non-P5	Associate Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Enrichment
Twin	FBS, P5	Senior Deputy Director of Athletics

Differences in title, ranging from department oversight (e.g., internal affairs, administration, student-athlete enrichment) to position level (e.g., deputy, executive, associate), can lend to some institutional inconsistency, especially when considering five of eight participants came from institutions of similar size and stature (FBS and P5). Emily Jones, who was the lone participant serving at an FCS institution, also had the most distinctly different title

outside of her SWA designation: Associate Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Enrichment. She shared some background on how institutional history has influenced her experience as SWA:

> So, I came here in fall of 2018, and at the time, we obviously had an SWA with [our previous athletic director]. She was the Chief Financial Officer of the university, which is just so random and nontraditional. So, I had a new athletic director, when he came in, and I came in shortly afterwards. And so, I had expressed an interest in a position or designation, I'm just like, that's something that I want to do eventually, whatever. And so when it finally came to pass, where he decided that I would make that change, and I would be SWA, all that was very interesting, because it wasn't like I was coming after someone that had had a traditional SWA role.

Emily Jones went on to explain how the nontraditional SWA who served prior to her has influenced and impacted some of her experience on campus:

> I don't know if the university has ever really had any sort of like traditional SWA. So um, so it's been really just trying to navigate what exactly that looks like. Leaning on some of my like mentors and women that I know that have done this position, whether, like, currently or now they're athletic directors that came out of being SWA to be an athletic director. And so it's been pretty nontraditional in that sense. And it's been obviously helpful working through the [conference office] and doing SWA meetings and having a better understanding of what exactly that is and it's been kind of a, I don't know, kind of make-it-my-own-type of situation. I do like the traditional SWA-type things, like Title IX and a lot of student-athlete welfare-type issues. So, from that standpoint, that's relatively traditional. But as far as who I was coming after it's totally different.

Similar to Emily Jones, Cheryl described a nontraditional path to SWA that one of her predecessors at a previous institution had had:

> Before I got to [my previous institution], the SWA that was there… she was a fantastic woman, but she had been the secretary to the athletic director. And so, they had gone through the certification process, and from my understanding, when they asked the athletic director, "who is your SWA?", he turned to a secretary and said, "she is," because he didn't have one and he didn't know what he was supposed to do, and it was a relatively new term back then. So, she wound up staying for like 20 or 30 years or 20 years in that role. She morphed. She definitely did…she became more like an HR person, but she had no business being a Senior Woman Administrator—or getting that designation [at the time she was named]. But that's how it was back then. I mean, everybody thinks it was so long ago that the designation got put into place, but it really hasn't been that long ago.

Cheryl and Emily Jones' accounts of their predecessors and how they came to get the designation were both unusual and do well to shed light on why some confusion surrounds the SWA designation today. With inconsistencies such as who is being named (athletic department personnel vs. on-campus personnel) and the stature of the person being named (a secretary vs. someone who has a greater level of work experience in an athletic department), it's no wonder the designation has so much variation across schools.

In another interview, Jenna shared her thoughts on the prestige the designation brings at her specific institution. Like Emily Jones and Cheryl, Jenna was another participant who worked a non-P5 institution. She shared her thoughts on being an SWA at her specific institution, which is one of 97 NCAA Division I schools (out of 350) that *does not* sponsor football. She stated:

> So ironically, I feel like at my institution being a SWA is not that big of a deal, if I'm being candid. I think that there are so many other things that we have going on institution-wise that the designation is just like, "oh, that person is supposed to have that," and it doesn't come with a lot of prestige. But I think globally, like when I say, you know, my title and it has SWA in it, I think that it does carry a little bit of weight. But I think that sometimes because of my institution, the perception of it is just a little bit different than if I was you know, the SWA at [a prominent P5 school]. I think that just the institution, the history of the institution, the level at which the institution is, I think it's just kind of a given that I'm in this role.

Jenna went on to share more about some of the inconsistencies she's experienced, as well as her perception on the differences of the role at NCAA Division I institutions vs. NCAA Division II or NCAA Division III:

> I think the challenge is a little bit what I talked about earlier, is the respect piece. I think that there's this really weird connotation around SWA, and there are some institutions that very blatantly go against what it stands for… I think that sometimes it can be limiting on both sides. Because I think that there are some people that feel that there are lots of really talented female administrators that probably, and coaches, and you know people that should be up for this designation that don't get it because of somebody else having a different perspective of what it the role means. So, it sometimes doesn't create a level playing field for the women that are trying to use it to create an equal playing field… I think it's a challenge that we probably see more so at a Division I. Because I feel like in Division II and Division III, I think this is just my perception, I think that they actually get the term and understand the education behind it more than Division I. I think that

> Division I people just get the designation and there's no, like, training, leadership, anything that goes into it. Whereas, you know, Division II, they have at their meetings, they have like SWA you know, like I wouldn't say that it's training, but just like conversation. We have SWA meetings, but they're more about, like, topics. There's not conversation about, like, how to be an SWA or what are some characteristics of good SWA. There's no manual, right? There's no there's no manual for it. But I think some divisions and levels do a much better job of mentoring folks to be ready for those roles than we do in Division I. I'll just say that.

When asked about the biggest challenges she has faced as an SWA, Emily Jones reflected on her experiences. She had similar sentiments to Jenna's mention of not having a manual or training on how to be an SWA. She focused again on her nontraditional predecessor:

> I would say the biggest challenge for me is kind of what I talked about at the beginning of how this was very nontraditional, previously, and so and then we went into the pandemic when I was just getting started in this designation. So, because it didn't have this, like, nice, defined role that I was stepping into to kind of just pick up where the other person left off. And it's been a challenge to kind of like find my space in this and what actually makes sense.

Emily Jones went on to share how a lack of a mentor due to her nontraditional predecessor also affected her experiences:

> And then not really having, like, a mentor of sorts within the athletic department to try and make sure that 1) we're doing things the right way and then 2) just helping, like, to be able to ask questions to you and like guide me along in those areas. And some things I

could ask my athletic director, but obviously being a woman it's very different than a male perspective as well.

While most participants described having similar responsibilities (Title IX and gender equity oversight, as well as oversight of most internal-facing units, such as student-athlete academics, nutrition, performance, sports medicine, etc.), a couple discussed the possibility of their roles changing due to new leadership. When asked to share her job responsibilities, Janet, who got a new athletic director about 10 months ago, shared:

> I'm gonna say this is going to have an awful lot to do with who you're working for as well, but my overall job responsibilities have shifted a little bit. But the ones that have maintained and over the years…I have oversight of NCAA Compliance or…so our the entire compliance office, all of our student-athlete development and leadership training, academic office, our sports medicine operation, our strength and conditioning operation, our sports nutrition operation, and then I liaison with several areas on campus so I really make sure that I'm the individual that connects the rest of Campus to our athletic department.

Cheryl, who has also experienced a change in athletic director leadership during her time at her current institution reflected on how that has impacted her experience. She shared:

> The perception of my role here has evolved since I got here. So, I was hired by one athletics director and then he left and went to [another institution], and then we had an interim for a year and a half and now I have the third athletics director. So, in three years…or two and a half years, I've had three athletic directors. When I first started, and the reason that I took this job, is the perception that I had of this role was that it was going to be similar to a deputy athletic director. So, it was going to be a lot of the internal

> operations stuff. I was going to have some opportunity to get some experience doing some different things. And then that evolved during COVID because I became the person on our staff that dealt with all of COVID, and then everything else I had. And then now with a new athletics director, I think I'm still trying to figure out what my role is going to be.

When asked about her view of her athletic director's perception of her role, Cheryl went on to state:

> So that's interesting because again, he's new. He's seven months in—six months in, and I think he's trying. And he's a brand-new athletics director, and so, I think he's trying to figure it out. He's eliminated our deputy athletic director. Like he removed that job altogether, and he's in the process of promoting a few people up to the same level that I'm at – I consider it up – and there's another female, which I love, and that's great. So, I think he's envisioning him, an executive team, and then everyone fills in below. Where I think the previous athletic director thought it was him, and then deputy athletic directors, then senior level staff, and then everybody else below them. Um…so this is a little bit different. He's one step removed rather than two steps removed.

The data that emerged from the information participants shared regarding their experiences for this subtheme was just as the overarching theme is titled: inconsistent. Emily Jones, Cheryl, Janet, and Jenna all shared differing experiences – at institutions of varying size – that somehow also had significant crossover. Their accounts of consistently inconsistent experiences and leadership styles does well to set up the next subtheme under the overarching theme of Consistently Inconsistent.

Leadership Matters

Continuing on under the second overarching theme, Consistently Inconsistent, the second subtheme is "Leadership Matters." During the course of the interview process, participants described their view of their athletic director's perception of their role as SWA. As they reflected, each shared their own account of how leadership has made a difference – positive or negative – in their experience serving in an executive leadership role and as the highest-ranking female in the athletic department. Seven of the eight participants outright stated that they felt their athletic director placed great value in them as SWAs. Twin shared her thoughts on her athletic director:

> I would say we're very much in alignment with how he uses my role. It's definitely in the governance that I'm a support system to him, and both in diversity of thought and in doing some of the things that the [conference] asks us to do. So, I would say very much in alignment, and then he would look at me as somebody from a gender equity, you know, as that falls under that role, but understanding that it's a team approach that looks at it.

Interestingly, the NCAA does not mandate that women in the SWA role oversee gender equity or Title IX, as Twin (and many other participants) alluded to. In fact, the 2021-2022 NCAA Manual simply states that "an institutional senior woman administrator is the highest-ranking female involved in the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletics program" (NCAA, 2021a). The manual goes on to state that if an institution has a female athletic director, they can appoint a second female to be the SWA.

While this discrepancy likely fits best under the institutional variation subtheme or the upcoming misperceptions subtheme, it is necessary to point it out here, since leadership also

plays a role in the duties of an SWA. Another big focus as it relates to leadership of the SWA and leadership from the athletic director is NCAA and conference governance, which Janet discussed during her interview. She shared:

> So, I have a new athletics director here. I worked with [the previous athletic director for 11 and a half years, and now I've been working for [the new athletic director] here at [the university] for 10 months, so my perception of the two of them may be a bit different because I just haven't had as much time with [the new athletic director]. But he… he very much values the female voice in athletics. He just hired a chief of staff who is female, and so, there's no doubt in my mind – like a hard stop on what a female can do in the athletics dept at [the university] under his direction. I feel that he definitely relies on me not just for historical perspective on what happens at [the university], but I also hold national positions that are very helpful right now to [our university's] development and future; and I know that he really respects that so I would say I feel respected and valued, and I think that's in direct relation to how he views this position.

Janet was not the only one who felt valued and respected by her athletic director in the hierarchy of athletics. Jamie also discussed strong support from her athletic director, who is also new to the athletic director role at her university and has only been in the role about 9 months. Jamie said:

> I think he thinks [the SWA role] very important. I know that the person that was before me that the role wasn't as… I have five departments that I oversee, and the person before me did not have that. He's only been here for about nine months. So, when he came in, he did the total restructure of the role and added the men's basketball component to it. And so, I think that alone shows that he values the role and understands that it's important. We talk almost every day about whatever, and he's been very, very supportive. Because

> again, I'm coming here and there's some changes I'm having to make, but he's been very, not just supportive to me, like, between the two of us but vocally supportive of the things that I've done with others and coaches and things, so that is really refreshing and very nice.

Jamie mentioned that support – vocally and beyond – isn't always present for women serving as SWA at other universities:

> That's one of the things I think people get the drawback on SWA. It's different at every institution. It's kind of up to them, the athletic director, how they see it and how they want it to be. So, some people like me, they have very robust roles very, you know, they involved in a lot of things, but then there are SWAs where their athletic director doesn't involve them, and they're not at the table making these decisions. They have no input.

In another interview, when asked about her athletic director's perception of her role, Barbara echoed some of Jamie's sentiments. She mentioned she felt the athletic director respected the role, but overall, underutilized it:

> I think he's probably a little old school and doesn't utilize that designation of the role as much as he probably could and should. But I think he respects it. I just don't think that he utilizes it, but I think that's also a result of our conference infrastructure and the role of the SWA in the conference.

Barbara's take on the conference infrastructure stood out, since so many other participants focused solely on conference and national-level governance responsibilities when discussing their athletic director's perception of their role. Janet mentioned a need for her athletic director to more clearly define her role as SWA at her institution:

> I think he needs to define it a little better, but I look at [another female staff member] as his right-hand person so, you know, am I still the "highest-ranking female?" I don't know that I necessarily look at myself that way, but I am definitely the individual that's involved with the [conference] SWA group and still that designation that allows me all those opportunities on a national level.

Beach Girl had similar thoughts regarding her role as SWA in conference and national-level governance, but she went a step further as to say she felt she could "stand in" when her athletic director was away. It is important to note here that Beach Girl has a female athletic director. When asked to reflect on her athletic director's perception of the SWA role, she stated:

> She's views it as a very strong role – one that she looks at as being her, you know, standing in her stead if she's not here. And can step in and be the director or serve in the role of, like, a Deputy Director of Athletics if she's not here. So, I definitely think it's one that she asked lots of questions and she involves this particular role, SWA is extraordinarily strong. Another piece that I will say is, as you know, just throughout the governance process, I more so see it, having a very strong voice, even leading in the in terms of governance, legislation, policy. So, if our coaches' associations have questions or proposals they want to push through, it comes through us as SWAs first for our stamp of approval before it goes on to our athletic directors. We do have a strong voice within the league as well.

It is interesting to note here that Beach Girl and Barbara, both of whom serve as SWA at FBS, Division I schools in the south, noted differences in their feelings at the conference level. Beach Girl, who serves under a female athletic director noted having a "strong voice" in governance. Barbara, on the other hand, who serves under a male athletic director, mentioned feeling

underutilized frequently. Beach Girl later discussed some of the differences she's experienced in the past working for a male athletic director:

> In my last institution, prior to this, there was some transition that was happening, and I think, because of my background, having been a sitting athletic director myself before stepping into that role, I think I brought a lot of value or value add into that SWA designation at [the previous institution]. So, I do feel that had I not had that athletic director experience before, I don't know if the role under that particular athletic director would have been as – if that voice would have been as strong. I will say that. I'm not sure... I don't think my...let's just say this way: I don't think my predecessor in the role that I filled at [the previous institution] had much of a voice. I'll just say that.

In another example shared by a participant, Emily Jones discussed how even geographic location on campus can play a part in the awareness of an SWA:

> My office isn't near [the athletic director's office]. I'm over in the library over academics. And that's just where my office and his is over in the athletic area. So, I think I have, at times, felt kind of out of sight out of mind. So, I have to, like, make sure that I'm still included in things. And I think, for me, I'm not the best at saying no to things, so I get handed a lot of various tasks that wouldn't make sense for an SWA to do. Am I actually the best person to do them? Maybe not, but I know I can do it, so I do it. But yeah, so I think his perception, I believe, is that it's important… but I think there's still there's opportunities for growth, that's for sure.

Because the SWA designation is so broad – and not defined at all other than by gender – these inconsistencies in leadership across institutions lends itself to some of the misperceptions surrounding the role. As we continue into the third subtheme under Consistently Inconsistent, we

will begin to explore more of the confusion and incorrect understanding that in some ways stigmatizes the SWA role and the women who serve in it.

Misperceptions

In the final section of the overarching theme Consistently Inconsistent, we will discuss how "Misperceptions" emerged as a subtheme. In addition to sharing their own perception of the SWA designation, and their view of their athletic director's perception, participants were also asked to reflect on how student-athletes, coaches, and other athletic department staff (e.g. business office, marketing, etc.) viewed their role. Participants described a variety of misperceptions – internal and external – they have experienced as SWAs, and this subtheme will focus on internal misperceptions first. When asked about the student-athletes' perception of her role, Janet thought a bit before sharing:

> Now that is a good question. Now that is a good question because I am going to assume that 98% of our student-athletes don't have any idea what it is or that it even exists. There's no… like, I don't go around telling people that I'm the SWA. I tell them I'm the Deputy Athletics Director, and I tell them the areas that report to me and that impact you as a student-athlete. I don't know that there's any understanding that there is an actual designation of SWA from our student-athletes. If I told students I was the SWA they would say, "I don't know what that stands for."

Janet went on to explain that if she explained what SWA stands for, it may open doors for even more confusion:

> Oh, if I told them it means senior woman administrator, they would go "oh, so you oversee all the women's programs." No. I have to explain to them that it's, you know, that what it means is that I am the highest-ranking female within the athletics department,

> which is an interesting scenario here right now because [my athletic director] just hired a female chief of staff. But to get back to your first question about student-athletes, I don't think they have the first clue.

Barbara shared similar experiences regarding some of the misperceptions student-athletes may have about the SWA designation:

> I think they're very… on the level of attention that student-athletes pay when I introduce myself, or when people introduce what I do and how I do it, probably underutilized, and I don't think that they always see or think of my designation when they think of me and what I can do for them. I can do these things, not that it's necessarily associated with me being an SWA.

Emily Jones mentioned that while she does not think student-athletes fully understand what the SWA designation is, but, as a result of her own student-athlete experience, she tries to be intentional in educating them when possible.

> For me, it's being more intentional with the student-athletes and just helping them understand like what I do, and I think I'm so... I went to school at [a university] and our SWA was over, I was a volleyball student athlete, so she was over volleyball. So, I got to spend a decent amount of time with her, and I remember my freshman year asking her, like, "what do you do, like, what is SWA anyway?" So, I had an understanding, not to the full degree of what it meant, but I had like at least a base-level understanding of what the SWA was. Whereas these students just kind of view me as like the one-stop shop for everything and know that I'm gonna care about them differently than someone else will and also come talk to me about stuff. But as far as actually understanding, like, Senior

> Woman Administrator, I don't think I would say… the majority don't have a full understanding of what that means.

In reflecting on her experiences, Emily Jones also referenced back to her nontraditional predecessor:

> And I think coming out of the pandemic, having a very nontraditional SWA, and then a pandemic happening when I started, and now everyone's back and just trying to… even for me, personally ironing out like what exactly am I going to do with just having them all here? I think it's a huge opportunity for me to continue to educate them about what [the designation] actually means.

When Beach Girl reflected on how other members of the athletic department, including coaches, viewed her role as SWA, she said:

> I think because I have the Deputy Athletic Director title, they recognize my level of expertise and leadership ability and see me as almost, like, the go-to person in [the athletic director's] stead. But I do have a few of our coaches who really understand what the SWA designation is, and so I would say it's maybe 50/50. But I think for some people and again, not across the board, but for some people, it is she is the Title IX person. I think I feel like a lot of people look at me as Title IX first. They don't really necessarily consider the SWA designation. I think the women in the department who understand what the designation is, they understand the role. They understand that this is a piece of the governance structure. And it's not anything different than what my [male] counterpart [here] does as the [other] Deputy Athletic Director. It's just a part of the NCAA's governance structure and having this position, so I do think the women in the department understand it a lot more maybe than men do.

When asked to reflect on how coaches viewed the SWA role at her institution, Jamie shared similar thoughts to Beach Girl. She mentioned female coaches having more of an understanding than male coaches – even those male coaches who were coaching female teams. She stated:

> Depends on the coach. I think that I mean, we have some coaches that...we have some male coaches who are very receptive and they understand it, and they welcome you either being their supervisor working alongside them, you know, whatever your job duties are. I think there is still a very heavy presence of male coaches, and some male coaches in female sports, which is sad that they don't respect or honor that position in the same way that they may with one of your male counterparts. Female coaches…I think they understand. A lot of female coaches, you know, they kind of think that oh, when I'm done with coaching, I'll just gravitate into an SWA role. I don't know if that's because that's how it used to be done, but I don't know if that is as common anymore. But female coaches, I think they very much are aware of what the role is, what the role means, what is supposed to be.

Jenna and Twin both mentioned they felt coaches were more attuned to what their role as SWA meant than student-athletes, likely due to the fact that as SWA they're involved with the conference and NCAA governance structure. Twin mentioned she felt like coaches knew how to use her as a resource:

> I would say coaches are more attuned to what the role is, and some more so than others. With that just depending on how old they are and what their past experiences have been. So, I do think that they're seeing me as a resource, both from providing resources but then also auditing some of the things that we do and just kind of navigating the system.

A stark difference between Twin's response and Jenna's response is the absence of the mention of gender equity or Title IX from Twin. While Jenna discussed coaches using her as a resource and coming to her for their needs, those needs largely surrounded gender equity concerns. She stated:

> So I think coaches generally, much like the student-athletes, I think that they typically come to me for those types of equity concerns. I think that for the female sports, I think that those head coaches are keenly in touch with what the SWA role and designation means for their sports, and they are typically the ones that are very active and having proactive conversations about some of the things that they see within their programs.

When reflecting on how other athletic department staff view her role, Twin later mentioned she felt there was a lack of understanding:

> I think they know that I have that designation, but I don't know that people would automatically know what that means for that. So, we spend a lot of time talking about the governance piece because that's really why it was designated, right. So, I think there's probably a misconception that the designation means that I'm in charge of all the women's sports, which is not true.

Some of these misperceptions can influence and affect the experience of a woman serving as SWA. The inconsistency in who misperceives what (e.g. student-athlete misperceptions vs. coach misperceptions, etc.) can also lead to more confusion, and ultimately can undercut some of the power and authority women in the SWA role hold. In the final emerged them, we will discuss participant reflections on inherent power, including credibility and the pigeonholing.

Theme 3: Inherent Power

The third theme that emerged from the data, Inherent Power, discusses some of the power, respect, and stature participants felt they had as a result of their SWA designation. experienced by participants on their respective campuses. Their "power" is revealed in a variety of ways, be it access to rooms they otherwise would not have or credibility that is associated with their "Senior" status in an athletic department. This third and final overarching theme also discusses three subthemes mentioned consistently throughout the interviews: 1) A Seat at the Table, 2) Credibility, and 3) Potential for Pigeonholing.

The subtheme "A Seat at the Table" is named after a direct quote by several participants when asked to reflect on the value of the SWA designation at their institution. The "seat" participants referenced showed up in the form of executive level leadership within an athletic department, conference governance, presidential-level discussions on campus, and national-level governance (e.g. NCAA). This subtheme also examines the self-proclaimed power participants felt they had – generally and specific to decision-making within their athletic department.

The second subtheme, "Credibility," refers to a certain type of authority and stature that most women mentioned during their interview. Participants shared their experiences gaining credibility through their SWA designation with fellow athletic department staff members, across institutions, and within the broader context of a university.

Finally, the "Potential for Pigeonholing" subtheme appeared as participants shared how some of the inherent power that comes with being an SWA can lead to being boxed in. Participants discussed how internal and external misperceptions can lead to being pigeonholed within an athletic department, either by areas of oversight or by skills others assume they have (or do not have).

A Seat at the Table

As previously mentioned, data emerged throughout the interviews with participants that pointed to the first subtheme in this overarching them: A Seat at the Table. During the interview process, participants were asked to reflect on the value that the SWA designation brings to their institution. While many answered in different ways, "a seat at the table" was a consistent phrase heard throughout discussions. Additionally, participants were asked to self-rank the power they felt they had within their athletic department, as well as reflect on whether they felt they had true decision-making power within their athletic department. When asked to rank their power in their athletic department on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, participants answered accordingly. Their answers can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Self-Ranking of Power Within Respective Athletic Departments

Pseudonym	Football Subdivision and Conference Affiliation	Time Worked at Current Institution	Overall Time Served as SWA	Self-Power Ranking out of 10
Cheryl	FBS, non-P5	2.5 years	9.5 years	7
Janet	FBS, P5	12 years	25 years	8
Jamie	FBS, P5	3 months	5 years	8
Jenna	Non-football, non-P5	3 years	3 years	6
Beach Girl	FBS, P5	2 years	11 years	8
Barbara	FBS, P5	1.5 years	10 years	7.5

Table 4 Continued

Self-Ranking of Power Within Respective Athletic Departments

Pseudonym	Football Subdivision and Conference Affiliation	Time Worked at Current Institution	Overall Time Served as SWA	Self-Power Ranking out of 10
Emily Jones	FCS, non-P5	2.5 years	2.5 years	7
Twin	FBS, P5	5 years	5 years	10

It is important to note that years served at their current institution and self-perception of power do not appear to be related in any way according to the participants of this study. The participant with the longest tenure at her current institution (Janet) ranked herself at an 8, whereas another participant who has served fewer years as SWA at her current institution (Twin) ranked herself at a 10. When asked to rank herself, Janet reflected thoroughly before landing on 8. She stated:

> That's a good question because I'm trying to put it as you asked it, as a result of my designation. As a result of my designation, I do believe I'm on the executive committee, although, my deputy athletics director title puts me on that committee… I'm talking this out…. For you and for myself as well… My deputy title gets me on the executive committee for sure. The SWA title gives me credibility in the room when I'm talking about [conference] meetings and SWA discussions at the [conference]. Also, the reason why I'm on the board of directors is because I'm the SWA representative … like the appointee …[an organization I'm a member of] gets one SWA appointee on the NCAA Board of Directors. So, because of my connection with [that organization] and the work that I've done there, and the respect that they have for the work that I'm doing, they

> designated me as that one representative on the board of directors. If I didn't have that SWA title, I'd never be on the board of directors. If I wasn't on the board of directors, probably would have been selected for [another NCAA] committee [I serve on]. So, all of that I got because of the SWA title so...

As she thought through her self-perceived power from an external standpoint, Janet went on to discuss her self-perceived power from an internal standpoint as well. She shared:

> I back that up to you know, when people listen to me in our department, what kind of power do I think I have? I think I'm probably around an eight on a scale of 10. People... respect what I'm saying and respect what I'm doing and maybe that is the opportunities that I have had because of the SWA title has actually created that.

As Janet transitioned into discussing her decision-making power at her institution, she shared:

> I think, you know, I'm speaking for myself, but I'm thinking of my friends, you know, I think I absolutely do [have true decision-making power] because the athletic director job is so massive at a Power 5 institution and it's impossible. He can't do that all on his own nor can he, you know, sit and worry about the decisions I make it on a day-to-day basis so the trust that he has to have with all of his executive staff members to go and do, and stop when we know he needs to be involved and include him where he needs to be involved, and get his input where he needs to be involved…but um, you know, on a daily basis I'll be making 30 decisions and I've got to make them and move. So, I think I don't…I don't worry about that. I think I have a good compass as to go… that's not my sole decision to make and I need to get other opinions and, you know, and slow it down.

Beach Girl had similar sentiments to Janet when it came to having true decision-making power at her institution, but she also placed an emphasis on over-communication with colleagues in the

decision-making process. When asked if she felt she had true decision-making power in her athletic department, she answered:

> Yes. That is correct. Now, we do over-communicate [and that] is something that we put a lot of emphasis on. So, there are times, I do believe, in kind of like the democratic leadership, where I'm able to ask certain people because again, being a deputy, you're over so many different units. Do I have the ability to make decisions? Absolutely. Do I have the power to make the decisions? Absolutely, but I like to do it armed with enough information to be able to make the most informed decision. But yes, I do feel like I have the power to make decisions.

Twin, who self-ranked her power at a 10, also discussed having true decision-making power in her athletic department in a way that required collaboration from other areas of the department. When asked if she felt she had true decision-making power in her athletic department, she shared:

> Yes. And, again, I'm gonna make decisions in all those units that impact me. I have input on decisions on all the others. I may not be the best person to make that decision on units I'm not working with, but I'm involved in those conversations [as the highest-ranking female in the athletic department] and can provide my input for sure.

Not everyone felt the same about their decision-making power, however. Cheryl, who ranked herself at a 7 out of 10 in terms of power, began shaking her head when asked if she felt she had true decision-making power in her athletic department. She stated:

> No. I... ultimately, it's... it lies in the hands of the athletic director. You know, all the decisions really, I mean, minimal decisions, I guess, but for major decisions and stuff, I will take it to the athletic director because until I know….and again, it's different because

> he only just got here like, when I was at [my previous institution], I felt like I had a lot more authority. Because they all knew me; I had grown up in that environment. And I had been at that institution and so people, people trusted what I was saying, and, you know, my athletic director was, you know, and even when I went through three athletic directors there. And by the time the third one got there, like I had been there so long that he just looked at me and was like, "what's your…what do you want to do?"

Cheryl went on to discuss a specific example recently where she felt decision-making power was placed on her in a scape goat-like scenario. She shared:

> I say it's interesting. I just went through two coaching searches. And, and this athletics director was like, you make the call, and I'm like, I'm not the boss. You make the call. And you know, and I think part of it is, I think he was like, well, if this gets screwed up and they lose, then it's on you. Like, it's easy to you know…I don't… I mean, because under any other circumstances, he hasn't asked me for my decision on anything. He says… he'll say, "oh well I want your feedback," but ultimately, he makes the decision. So, yeah to go back to your question about my authority, I think people look to me for decisions, and I think people like me to solve problems for sure.

Jenna, who has moved into an interim athletic director role recently in addition to her SWA role, reflected on whether she felt she had more power before or after the interim tag was added:

> I would say before I had, I had probably a 7 or 8… after I think I would probably put… this might surprise you… I think after I have probably a 6 because it's... I'm now at the mercy of the [university] president and there's no... I'm in a weird dynamic where I'm making decisions.

When asked about whether she felt she had true decision-making power in the department, she went on to say:

> So, when I was in the deputy [athletic director] role, yeah, yes. I felt like I was able to make decisions. In this role, yes, I think I have true decision-making power, but I think that it's... I have to do a lot more explaining, clarification, data analysis, all of that, because the person that I'm answering to is not in the athletics world, whereas previously, the person the person that I was answering to knew the context of everything.

Jenna's account of a change in self-perceived power aligns well with an earlier statement from Cheryl about having to interview for an athletic director role:

> For your entire career as an athletics department employee, you're applying to jobs with people who have done what you do. The one time you're trying to obtain the highest position you can, you're applying for a job with people who are going to review it that have no idea what you've done for your entire career. And it's like, how you do you describe to someone that you are the highest-ranking senior… like, a college president, a provost, a legal counsel, may or may not have any concept of what you have done in your career and so that title could hurt or it could help – it just depends.

Barbara, who rated herself first at a 7 and then at a 7.5 to "give them the benefit of the doubt," discussed her decision-making power in her athletic department as not having anything to do with her SWA designation.

> In some spaces, yeah. Like roster management, gender equity planning, things that pertain to like sport administration... really all areas that don't pertain to be being an SWA.

These firsthand accounts do well to provide insight into the self-perceptions of power of women serving as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. Despite being the highest-ranking female in the athletic department, participants ranked their power within their department as low as 6 or 7 out of 10. While most felt they had true decision-making power, that was not the case for all. This data does well to examine inherent power of women serving as SWA and sets the stage for a discussion on credibility and potential for pigeonholing later in this chapter.

Credibility

In the literature review, we established the use of Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept of credibility. They examined the impact credibility has on perceptions of power, and their findings suggested that there is a direct relationship between credibility and perception of power within a person, especially in a social capacity (Nesler et al., 1993). As we dive further into the overarching theme "Inherent Power," it is important to reiterate Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept since credibility is one of the emerged subthemes. As participants reflected on their perception of their power as SWAs at their respective institutions, an underlying theme was the credibility that the SWA subconsciously gave them as the women who hold the designation.

When reflecting on some internal perceptions of the SWA designation at her institution, Jenna mentioned she felt a certain level of automatic respect due to holding the designation. She said:

> I think that there is a level of stature that comes with [the designation]. And I think that there's a level of respect that people tend to give. I don't know that everyone understands how the SWA role can help them in their day-to-day jobs, which would be actually really good you know, how does it affect an everyday job? Like, how can I help an athletic

trainer, you know, so I think that just maybe it's not as knowledgeable but something that we probably should and could be educating our departments on better.

Emily Jones shared similar thoughts regarding internal perceptions of her role as SWA, but again referenced how her age (33) plays a role in the respect she garners from fellow athletic staff members:

> Yeah, so it really depends on who it is. So, the others that are on senior administration with me, they obviously have respect for me and all that... the younger staff… I think I am still, like, pretty young, and I'm not gonna say, like, act young but, like, I know more about current topics and cultural things that are young, and so I can have conversations with them. I'm not that far removed, where it's, like, "she's so old" and [it's hard] just immediately commanding that respect from them, just the age standpoint.

She went on to say that awareness of the stature and importance of her role as SWA does seem in increase over time, even with younger staff. She said:

> I think for the younger ones, it's interesting. When they first meet me, they don't really know what to think. And then as they get to know me, they get a little bit more comfortable and then that makes some of these like higher-level decisions and then they're like, oh, yeah, right. Like you are you are, "important" within the department. So, it's an interesting balance, l find myself in because I'm not I don't want to be the type of person that just trying to, like insert my authority over like a 24-year-old staff member. Like, that's not something that I want to do. I want them to feel comfortable talking to me. But there are times when I'm like, hey, like, let's remember what I do versus what you're doing. Like it's a little more respect, maybe don't be so candid with me in some of

these situations. But overall, I would say that there is that respect level of just being SWA and when it comes to certain topics.

When asked to reflect on whether her sport assignments enhanced her role, Beach Girl shared that she thought it brought a "human" element to her work. She said:

> Yes, I would say absolutely. It is because one, it gives you a pulse of what's happening in the world and where we are and why we're here. So, we're here to be a part of the community development and growth and maturation of the student-athletes that we serve. And having those sport administrative oversight duties allows me to be again have a pulse on what's happening within our teams, even from a national front... from a legislative perspective. So, I do think yes, it definitely enhances and kind of humanizes the work that I do. So, when I have to make decisions about athletic training or strength and conditioning or compliance or whatever, having those sport administrative duties allows you to just kind of humanize why you're doing what you're doing.

Janet agreed that her sport oversight also enhanced her role as SWA. She also mentioned a recent change to her assignments that she feels will benefit both her career and the department she works in. She shared:

> Yes. 100%. I had men's and women's basketball previously, and I mean, I think in every way I can look at it [it enhances my roll]. I'm just gonna really miss women's basketball. The deal is I'm going to really miss it. But as far as enhancing my career within the department or even with… to have, you know, an entire department and the football program understand that there is a female in the department that is also involved in football, is, I think, is really impactful for them, too. They may not understand it right away, but I think it's impactful for them as well. And it will be really impactful for me to

> impact in a different way than may day-to-day job impacts football because, you know, I'm kind of the person that has to say no to football a lot. So, they will sometimes go "is she throwing up roadblocks or taking out roadblocks?" As a sport administrator, you want to be taking road blocks away and making sure the student experiences are great and asking, "what can I do to help you," and you have to say "no" sometimes, but I'm sort of in that role, you know, I work with them hand-in-hand in the admissions process, and they don't get too happy with me when I tell them "sorry, this one is not going to go"—but it's a four star [recruit]… I don't know… This will give me a new, nice opportunity for them to see me a little bit in a different way. I think there's only benefits that will come out of this. I'm going to make sure that that's the case.

When asked to share whether she had any sport administrator duties as a part of her role, and what that meant as far as oversight, Barbara answered honestly:

> Yeah, so I'm not trying to be a smartass. But, like, being a sport administrator in and of itself is its own job. So, like, being a sport administrator.... So, oversight of budget, liaison to the head coach and athletic director, scheduling, roster management, going to games, going to practices, traveling with the team. Like, being and I know, I guess, being a coordinator is different everywhere, but like, those are the things that I do with my sports every day, and then from overseeing this sport administrator group, trying to ensure that there's equitable best practices and dictation tools for administrators, our student-athletes, and our head coaches… are getting, you know, some semblance of like equitable resources, care and attention.

As Barbara reflected on her sport administrator assignments, she had conflicting answers on whether sport oversight enhanced her role. She said:

> No, I don't think it enhances my role is in SWA. Yes, I think it enhances my role as an administrator.

These separate answers were interesting to note, and were in contrast to others, such as Beach Girl, who directly noted that her sport oversight helped her to have a pulse on the student-athlete experience, which tied into her duties as SWA.

Credibility has also played a role for women serving as SWA from an external perspective as well. When asked to reflect on how holding the designation has impacted her career trajectory (or will impact it in the future), Jamie said:

> I mean, I think it's only helped me. I think… you know, just being someone that's transitioned to this job, I wouldn't have gotten this job if I hadn't been an SWA at my previous institution. So, I just… I know the candidates that were in my pool with me, the three that came on campus [for interviews], all of us were SWAs – every single one of them at another institution. So, I know, like, without having that opportunity, I wouldn't have even able to get this job.

Jamie's account of needing the SWA designation at a previous institution in order to get her new more elevated role at her current institution is but one example of how important credibility is for women serving as SWA.

Nesler et al.'s (1993) research on credibility showed a direct correlation between credibility and perception of power within a person, and this subtheme did well to outline just how closely related perception of power and credibility are to holding the SWA designation at an institution. As we move into the final subtheme of the overarching theme "Inherent Power," it is important to reiterate Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept once more. Despite having a seat at the table *and* feeling they garnered a certain level of respect and credibility within their departments,

participants still described the potential for being "pigeonholed" within their specific departments *and* in the broader landscape of college athletics as SWAs.

Potential for Pigeonholes

In the third and final section of the overarching theme Inherent Power, we will discuss how "Potential for Pigeonholes" emerged from the interviews with multiple participants. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines "pigeonhole" in two ways: as a noun and as a verb. As a noun, the definition is: "a neat category which usually fails to reflect actual complexities" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., n.p.). As a verb, the definition shifts slightly to: "assign to an often restrictive category (Merriam-Webster, n.d., n.p.). These definitions perfectly describe what participants discussed when they reflected on the potential for being pigeonholed in their careers. As she thought about some of the challenges and successes that the SWA designation has presented throughout her career, Janet said:

> Where [the designation] could become detrimental is where people don't understand what it – that it's not a job, but a designation, and they also believe that it comes with only certain things that you can do. When they hear that you are the SWA, they absolutely believe that all you are doing is fighting for women on your campus, that you can't do anything else besides manage Title IX or gender equity issues, which often times comes with these positions, but that doesn't mean I'm not in conversations with everyone fighting for our men's program just as much as I'm fighting for the women's programs.

Janet went on to say that the misperception of "only fighting for women's sports" has driven her to be very intentional in her communication with the athletic directors she's worked for. She shared:

> I've actually had that conversation with every single one of my athletic directors about… particularly on sport administration, an opportunity to oversee sports… I've made it really clear that if they don't want to also pigeonhole individuals. and me, in the thought process of like, "well, you are the SWA and you are really only looking out for women's programs…" If they don't want to do that, and they understand what that impact has on our department and to other younger women looking to see if that's what they want to do [for a career], then they will, in fact, allow me to be… have sport administration oversight of some of our men's programs to be sure that no one can mix that up.

Cheryl reflected on her own experiences in sport oversight, and shared that being a sport administrator for a revenue-generating sport, like football, can help, not only with avoiding being pigeonholed, but also with external credibility. Cheryl said:

> Externally [the designation] probably helps. Like when I go to apply for other jobs… that's why I want a male revenue sport because that will help me if I want to become an athletic director, or whatever. Because some of the things they use as an excuse to not hire you is that "well, you don't have any revenue, you know, experience…" Like revenue [sport] oversight experience, or you haven't worked with the football program, or you know… So, that can hurt you in the interview process.

Cheryl wasn't the only one to specifically reference football and the important role it plays in athletic departments during her interview. Beach Girl pointed to men's revenue-generating sports like men's basketball and football as being important to career trajectory for women serving as SWA. She said:

> I know I mentioned this earlier… depending on where you are, particularly in the [conference] where I am, while I do think we have a voice, if we don't see more people,

> more women with the SWA designation, on the external side and/or overseeing sports that are considered traditionally male dominated, i.e., the men's basketballs and footballs of the world, we may start to just see women being pigeonholed into the internal side.

When Beach Girl referenced the "internal side," she meant the internal side of college athletics. This includes the more student-facing roles (e.g. compliance, student-athlete development, academics, etc.), which women have historically been in charge of, while their male counterparts tend to be in the external facing roles (e.g. fundraising, marketing, athletic director, etc.). Beach Girl went on to say that she has enjoyed the internal aspects of her job, but, with a smirk, she added that women are more than capable of overseeing men's sports. She said:

> I totally enjoy what I do on the internal side, and I think it's a passion of mine. But if we look long term, I do think women have to be able to branch out and oversee football for just for, you know, God forbid, a woman doesn't know how to oversee football because you know, a dollar is different in football than it is in soccer.

Beach Girl's sarcasm in her statement about the difference of a dollar between football and soccer was evident. Barbara also touched on the potential for pigeonholes as she reflected on some of the challenges having the SWA designation has presented throughout her career. She shared:

> I think the challenges are just the pigeonhole perception of what an SWA does. The assumption that SWA only handles things that pertain to women, women's sports. I think that's the challenge. And then just again, the underutilization of the reach of an SWA within the conference and national infrastructure.

Her mention of underutilization referred to her perception that the designation is underutilized at her current institution – by coaches, student-athletes, and other athletic department staff. Another

interesting piece of information Beach Girl shared during her interview was that while she feels that only overseeing women's sports can "box you in," she also confided that she *does* only oversee women's sports at her institution – but not necessarily by design. She shared:

> In terms of challenges...like I mentioned before, I think it's just people boxing you in as a senior *women's* administrator and having to correct them and say senior *woman*, singular, and "no, I don't just oversee women's sports." Now, unfortunately, the way things are set up here, I do technically just oversee women's sports, but it's just because we have many more women's sports than we do men's sports. So, we have 10, women's sports and 6 men's sports. So, it's just the way it's set up, and I will say that in terms of success, the four teams that I have are highly successful teams compared to some of our men's teams.

It is important to include a reminder here that Beach Girl was the only one of the participants who works for a female athletic director. She went on to reflect on the potential for pigeonholing from an external standpoint:

> There's that piece where from the outside looking in, it could be viewed as a challenge that I only oversee women's programs. But I also oversee, I look at it as I oversee our most successful programs, right, as opposed to, you know, kind of glass-half-full mentality. So, I do think that there is a level of being "boxed in," where people just think are pigeonholed, where folks are just thinking, you only oversee women, you only care about the women, you don't do anything for the men, just that type of thing.

Jamie shared similar sentiments when it comes to the potential for being pigeonholed, and mentioned that while she has felt boxed in at previous institutions, that is not the case in her new role. She said:

> I think here it's a little bit different too, because it's very much usually you'll have people that think SWA oversees the women's sports only handles issues dealing with, you know, student-facing organizations, and although I had those student facing organizations or performance areas here, I don't feel like I'm only supposed to be governing women's issues.

Jamie later went on to share some external perceptions that exist that can aid in the stigma associated with being pigeonholed as a SWA. One of those perceptions is that if a woman serves as an SWA, she will be pigeonholed into that role and never ascend to the "big chair" of becoming an athletic director. While this perception is certainly a reality given some of the data around male versus female NCAA Division I athletic directors – only 26 of 345 NCAA Division I athletic directors, or 7.5 percent, are women (Athletic Director U, 2022) – it is not true in all cases. Jamie shared two specific instances where it has not been true:

> I know a lot of people feel like you can't ascend to be an athletic director [from being an SWA], but there's, I think, the last two women that have become Power 5 athletic directors, Nina [King at Duke University], but before her, both of those people had been SWAs at their previous institution. I'm talking about Carla Williams [at the University of Virginia] and Candice [Storey Lee] at Vanderbilt. So, I just think that it depends on the person of course, and I know there's obstacles. I don't think... I don't see this designation as an impediment to me trying if I wanted to be an athletic director – to be that, but I only think it's going to help me in my next role, whatever that may be.

While there are no clear indicators (aside from, perhaps, the gender-based title) that an SWA could potentially be pigeonholed into a "women's only" segment of leadership in college athletics, the perception that that can happen is certainly alive and well.

Member Checks

In order to ensure the findings outlined above still aligned with the experiences of all eight participants, the researcher reached out to participants via email to confirm. The researcher provided participants with a description of the overarching themes identified throughout the interview process. As a reminder, the email correspondence is outlined in Appendix E. All eight participants replied to the researcher's email and stated the themes accurately captured the essence of their experience. While five participants simply replied with a short sentence agreeing that the themes aligned with their experience, three replied with more detail and additional thoughts. Janet replied and stated:

> I agree with [the Designation for Representation] theme. I would not want to see the SWA designation go away because I still see it as an important designation in conference governance structures if nothing else. I worry about women not having a seat at this table [without the SWA designation].

Regarding the second overarching theme, Consistently Inconsistent, Janet remarked:

> There are MANY misconceptions regarding this designation. Not all ADs (male ADs) understand or want to understand the designation. Most male ADs will simply default this position to overseeing "women's issues" as well as Title IX.

Emily Jones also replied to the researcher's email in more detail and stated:

> I agree 100% with your findings. I don't really have anything to add other than it's really interesting that these are the emerging themes across your conversations and I'm hopeful that this type of research will benefit the SWA designation moving forward!

Finally, Cheryl agreed with the three overarching themes overall, but replied specifically regarding the Designation for Representation theme. She said:

I'm still conflicted on this, but yes, this is an overall theme.

While the "member check" process was a simple one, it also provided additional insights from a few participants. Janet was the most detailed in her response to the individual overarching themes and amplified the first two emerged themes in this research (the Designation for Representation and Consistently Inconsistent). Although the participants' responses were not overwhelmingly detailed, they did well to confirm the researcher's findings from both individual conversations and data analysis.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the self-reported experiences of eight women serving as SWA at an NCAA Division I institution in the United States to the audience. Three overarching themes emerged from the collected data following the participant interviews: 1) Designation for Representation, 2) Consistently Inconsistent, and 3) Inherent Power. The phenomenological design of this study aimed to capture the essence of the participants' experiences as SWAs, and those experiences were captured in the aforementioned overarching themes, as well as nine subthemes. The participants' experiences were explained using direct quotes from interview transcripts in an effort to illustrate their experiences as SWAs to the audience. Additionally, this chapter discussed the information confirmed during the member check process. In the final chapter, a summary of findings, discussion of the study, and implications will be provided. Additionally, limitations are addressed and concluding thoughts are offered.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

As a reminder, this research study employed a phenomenological design in an attempt to examine the experiences of a select group of women who serve as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. Specifically, this research explored their self-perception of power in their role at their respective institutions and whether they felt they had true decision-making power. In this fifth and final chapter, a summary of the study will be provided, restating the study's problem, purpose, research questions, and methodology. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the study's findings, which are broken down by internal and external perceptions. Finally, chapter five will offer information on the study's implications and limitations, recommendations for future research, as well as concluding remarks from the researcher.

Summary of the Study

This research explored the experiences of eight women serving as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. Participants ranged in age (e.g. 33 to 58), amount of years served as an SWA (e.g. 2.5 years to 25 years), conference and school size (e.g. FCS, FBS, P5 and non-P5), and multiple racial ethnicities were represented. In order to participate in this study, participants were required to actively be an SWA and to have served as SWA for at least two years. Having served for two years was included as intentional criteria to ensure that participants had a holistic understanding of their role as SWA at their institution.

Because of the study's phenomenological design, the interviews were utilized in an effort to capture the essence of the SWA experience through the spoken word and self-reports of the

participants. Each participant took part in one interview, ranging in time from 22 minutes to 43 minutes. The interviews were completed using Zoom to accommodate for two things: 1) to allow the interviewer and the interviewee to "meet" despite geographical differences and 2) so the researcher could utilize Zoom's video capabilities to also capture body language during the interviews. The interview guide (Appendix D) included an intentional, semi-structured design so that the researcher could co-create meaning with the participants throughout their conversation. This semi-structured approach allowed the interviewer to ask additional questions, where necessary, when participants shared information that needed further exploration.

Overview of the Problem

Although progress has been made for women in sports, particularly in participation, leadership roles for women in sports are not as common (Whisenant et al., 2002). The passage of Title IX, saw women's oversight of athletic programs drop from 90 percent before 1972 to just 18 percent by 2000 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2002; Whisenant et al., 2002). That decrease in leadership roles and program oversight eventually led to the development of the SWA designation, which was intended to remedy the issue of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics (Smith et al., 2020).

Despite some significant growth and advancement in its earliest years, confusion has surrounded the SWA designation in recent years (Wells et al., 2020a). Due in part to the confusion surrounding the designation, the self-perceived power of the women serving in that role has also been impacted. In fact, as recently as 2017, a report was released by the NCAA indicating several common misperceptions about the SWA designation. Those misperceptions included incorrect assumptions about the purpose of the role (e.g. it only oversees women's sports), whether the designation is an actual position within an athletic department,

misunderstandings about what "senior" means within the designation (e.g. highest-ranking, *not* oldest or longest serving), and whether the designation is a requirement per the NCAA (according to the NCAA manual, it is not a requirement) (NCAA, 2018b).

The confusion associated with the designation has led to an impact on growth in leadership roles for women in collegiate athletics despite the increase in female student-athlete participation over the years. In December 2020, the NCAA published a report in the form of an interactive visual dashboard showing sponsorship and participation totals across all divisions. While the total number of NCAA sponsored men's sports programs has essentially stayed the same since 1982 (2,778 programs in 1982 vs. 2,989 programs in 2020), only noting a 7.5 percent increase, the number of NCAA sponsored women's sports programs has nearly doubled across 40 years jumping from 1,767 programs in 1982 to 3,672 or 108 percent (NCAA, 2020). Regarding individual participation, the NCAA (2020) reported 97,423 male student-athletes and 86,645 female student-athletes competing in the 2019-2020 academic year (NCAA 2020).

With such a significant increase in female participation, it is important to explore why leadership roles in athletics have not grown at the same rate for women. Women have often been forgotten from leadership roles since the NCAA merged with the AIAW in 1981. Although the SWA designation was created to combat the exact issue of the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics, much is left to be desired.

Stigmatization, as well as social role theory and role congruity theory, serve as a great foundation to understand how stigmas associated with women in leadership roles may impact women serving as an SWA and lead to varying levels of confusion within athletic departments (Peachey & Burton, 2011; Wells et al., 2020). In order to combat the confusion and stigmatization that exists within and around the SWA role in college athletics, it is important to

discover whether the designation is still necessary or effective in today's landscape of college athletics.

The timeliness of this research study is prime for this analysis of the SWA role as the COVID-19 pandemic has offered organizations the opportunity to reexamine existing structures in the workplace. Additionally, the 50th anniversary of Title IX legislation being signed into law was on June 23, 2022. These monumental milestones can provide universities and organizations with appropriate excuses to review and potentially realign themselves, making now a great time to revisit the SWA designation and its effectiveness. This qualitative study examined the factors – historical, structural, and social – that affect the SWA designation and the women who serve in the role. The study also explored how credibility and self-perceived power can impact the effectiveness – and necessity – of the designation. The insights gained from this study aim to provide a better understanding of how women serving as SWA experience their internal (within their athletic department) and external (within their conference and the NCAA) environments at NCAA Division I institutions.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research was to gain insight to the experiences of the women who hold the SWA designation and their perceptions about the power the title holds. The study was designed to provide participants an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences, as well as consider internal and external factors that may influence their perception of power as it relates to their SWA designation. In order to understand the experiences of women serving in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States, four main research questions were used to guide this research. The following questions guided this study:

1. How does the administrator in the SWA role self-report her overall experience in the role?
2. How does the SWA perceive the overall power of her designation?
3. Does the administrator in the SWA role perceive herself to have true decision-making power within the athletic department?
4. How do administrators in the SWA role perceive the designation to add value to the athletic department?

Methodology

This research employed a phenomenological design in an effort to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Per Lichtman's (2013) concept of phenomenology, its purpose is "to describe and understand the essence of lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon" (p. 83). As this study examined the self-perception of power in women serving in the SWA role, phenomenology was the most beneficial design style to capture the essence of the SWA experience.

In addition to the phenomenological design, a conceptual framework involving Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to athletics and Nesler et al.'s (1993) concept of credibility and perceived power were used as a lens through which to examine the findings. Connell (1987, 1995) first conceptualized hegemonic masculinity as a "gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Nesler et al.'s (1993) examined "the effect of credibility on the perceptions of power of a source" (p. 1409). Their findings suggested that there is a direct relationship between credibility and perception of power within a person, especially in

a social capacity (Nesler et al., 1993). These concepts aided in the guidance of the interview and data collection processes.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to allow the researcher to co-create meaning with the participants during their conversations. Concurrent analysis of the data was completed as interviews took place, allowing the interviewer to keep information fresh in the mind and organized as more participants shared their experiences. Once interviews were completed, they were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for common experiences, which made up the overarching themes and subthemes.

Findings

Through the participant interviews, member checks via email with participants, and analysis, the researcher gathered rich data. As previously mentioned, concurrent analysis was utilized when following each interview and the researcher reviewed interview notes and identified three main themes and nine subthemes:

1. The Designation for Representation
    a. Diversity of Thought
    b. If She Can See It, She Can Be It
    c. Double-Edged Sword
2. Consistently Inconsistent
    a. Institutional Variation
    b. Leadership Matters
    c. Misperceptions
3. Inherent Power
    a. A Seat at the Table

b. Credibility

c. Potential for Pigeonholing

The emerged overarching themes, as confirmed by participants, accurately captured the essence of their experiences as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions. In the following section, a more thorough examination of how the research questions led to the discovery of the themes and subthemes is discussed.

Discussion

In this portion of chapter five, we will dive deeper into the findings and how they answer this study's research questions. The sections are broken down as follows: 1) "The Good," which refers to some of the "good" the SWA designation does as reported by participants; 2) "The Bad," which discusses some of the more negative aspects of the SWA designation; and 3) "The Future," which refers to things that must be considered as we look to move the SWA designation forward into the new era of college athletics. Existing literature will be woven into the discussion on this study's findings as they relate to the participants' experiences as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States.

The Good

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the essence of the lived experience of women who serve as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions. The researcher, having disclosed biases prior to conducting this study, was surprised to find that all participants felt the designation was still necessary in today's landscape of college athletics. If we take a step back, we are reminded of the similarities between women in higher education and women in athletics. Federal legislation has led the country to attempt to create more equal workplaces, and

participation – in education and athletics – typically sees a spike in numbers (Johnson, 2017; Parker, 2015).

Legislation that has had a more direct impact on athletics, such as Title IX, has led to participation in women's sports nearly doubling in the 50 years since its inception. And the submerging of the AIAW into the NCAA in 1981 led to the development of the SWA designation, which was put in place to ensure that women would have a seat at the table where decisions in conference- and national-level governance are made.

Representation

Nearly every participant in this study remarked about the necessity of the SWA designation. They felt it was not necessary for them to complete their job duties, but that it was necessary within the larger scheme of NCAA and conference governing structures. Barbara highlighted the importance of the SWA designation as a means to advocate for others and said, "I think it's necessary in the NCAA athletics ecosystem… It's a greater concept of the microcosm on a campus, right? Like the SWA having spaces in rooms at the NCAA level, to provide a voice for others."

Many participants felt that women would not be hired into senior leadership roles without having the SWA designation. Jamie went so far as to say, "I do think the designation is still necessary, because I don't know if you would have women overseeing some of the things that we do oversee, and there's *still* not enough women in the business, we know that. So, I don't think without it that there would be the reason to continue to hire some women in some roles." She was not alone in that thought.

Another reason participants felt the designation was still necessary in today's landscape of college athletics is for diversity of thought. As depicted by Barbara's aforementioned quote,

most participants felt the SWA designation is still useful because it allows for diversity of thought, specifically in governance at the conference and national levels. To provide context on why it is so important to have an SWA involved in governing, the Southeastern Conference (SEC), one of the P5 conferences, makes mention of the SWA four times in its 2017-2018 bylaws. They include the requirement to have an SWA on the SEC executive committee, which serves as the main leadership committee of the conference and approves annual operating budget of the conference (Southeastern Conference, 2017). The SEC also includes the requirement to have athletic directors and SWAs sign off on hiring compliance in its bylaws (Southeastern Conference, 2017). As another example, the Big Ten Conference, a P5 conference, referenced the SWA 30 times in their 2016-2017 conference handbook, almost in tandem with every mention of an athletic director. This outright mention of the SWA as being core to a conference governing structure ensures that a woman's voice and perspective will be heard in an otherwise male-dominated space.

The final reason why representation proved to be an important factor for the continuation of the SWA designation is to provide visibility on aspirational roles for women in sport. As Emily Jones considered what the SWA designation has meant for her career, she said, "I think previously, I always wanted to be an SWA, and that was kind of like a career goal. Whenever anyone would ask me what I wanted to do, I eventually wanted to be an SWA. So, I think it impacted [my career trajectory] from that standpoint of, like, giving me kind of like a North Star that I was shooting for." This revelation can be true for administrators setting goals for their careers, as well as for student-athletes who aspire to work in college athletics someday. Cheryl shared the importance of representation for student-athletes specifically and said, "[Historically] in certain athletic departments, you wouldn't see a female in a position of authority or on an

executive team at all. So, I think it adds value so that your student-athletes and your staff can see that there's someone in that role as a role model in some ways. So, "if she can see it, she could be it" kind of thing. I think it adds value in that way."

Credibility

When considering "the good" that the SWA designation does, credibility is a huge factor. To revisit part of the conceptual framework of this study, Nesler et al.'s (1993) research suggested that there is a direct relationship between credibility and perception of power of a person (Nesler et al., 1993). Their research was "designed to examine the effect of credibility on the perceptions of power of a source" (Nesler et al., 1993, p. 1409). As consider women serving in the SWA role in the predominantly masculine field of athletics, an examination of credibility and the perceived power of the woman serving in that role was crucial to this study. The examination provided a deeper understanding of the SWA designation, and its effectiveness.

As it relates to this study, credibility of an SWA proved to be a key factor regarding the effectiveness of her role. As she considered her self-perception of power in the athletic department where she works, Jenna said, "I think that there is a level of stature that comes with [the designation]. And I think that there's a level of respect that people tend to give." Indeed, there seems to be an automatic level of respect and prestige that comes with being an SWA at an NCAA Division I institution. The same may be said for other divisions as well, but NCAA Division I was focused on for the purposes of this study.

There is an unspoken understanding in some college athletics that an SWA is sort of like an athletic director's right hand. The SWA can and, in many cases, does serve as the number two in the department. For SWAs, the credibility lies almost solely in the title – the mention of *senior* in "Senior Woman Administrator" garners a higher level of respect than if it were just simply

"woman administrator," which implies something entirely different than what the SWA is supposed to do. Janet's reflection on the power she has in her department due to her designation and title led her to say, "I think I'm probably around an eight on a scale of 10. People... respect what I'm saying and respect what I'm doing and maybe that is the opportunities that I have had because of the SWA title has actually created that." Her acknowledgement that the designation has afforded her more respect and opportunities is a key factor in why credibility is equally as important to representation for women who serve as SWAs.

The Bad

As we consider "the bad" of the SWA designation, it's important to remember that some of the findings in this research study (e.g. misperceptions, potential for pigeonholing, inconsistency, underrepresentation, etc.) are not exclusive to women in leadership roles in athletics. In the literature review, it was mentioned that women have earned more than 50 percent of all degrees since 2006 (the "more than 50 percent" mark remains the same for some degrees as far back as 1978) (Johnson, 2017). Yet, despite their participation in higher education, 86 percent of all presidents, provosts, and chancellors and 75 percent of full professors on college campuses were still male as of 2012 (Parker, 2015; Johnson, 2017). Parker's (2015) study also went on to demonstrate that female professors "move up the career ladder slower, are less productive, have heavier teaching loads, and have lower salaries" (p. 9) when compared to their male counterparts.

These data shed light on some of the disparities between men and women in leadership roles in higher education, which extends to athletics. As an additional reminder, Whisenant et al.'s (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity in sport suggests that "male" is standard and "female" is other. To put it simply, Whisenant et al. (2002) stated hegemonic masculinity is "the

simple acceptance of the status quo in society" (p. 486). In college athletics, that acceptance of the status quo has led to the formation of what many refer to as the "good ol' boys network," which has heavily contributed to the lack of women in leadership roles within college athletics (Mechels-Struby, 2013; Rhode & Walker, 2008). A combination of historical events, such as the demise of the AIAW, and misperceptions have led to confusion and inconsistency around the SWA designation.

Inconsistency

There are many things that have led to the misperceptions of the SWA designation, but perhaps none more consistent than inconsistency. Inconsistency in the NCAA's desire to sponsor women's sports. Inconsistency in job title and duties. Inconsistency in athletic department structure and athletic director leadership. All of these factors have impacted the SWA designation over time, and ultimately, the women who serve in it.

It was discussed in the literature review that although the NCAA has defined the SWA in a way that ensures women have a seat at the table, actual decision-making power may be discounted when the SWA does not have the word "Director" in her official title (Wells et al., 2020a). Because SWA is simply a designation, and not a set of defined job responsibilities, the woman holding the title could be operating in any level of the department from low- to mid- to senior-level administration. While all participants were acting SWAs, their titles differed tremendously. In fact, no two participants had the same title in their athletic department, despite some coming from institutions of similar size and resources. Their titles ranged from Associate Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Enrichment to Senior Deputy Athletic Director. While all have some form of "Athletic Director" in their title, the prefix fluctuated from Associate to Senior Executive to Executive Associate and beyond.

This type of inconsistency goes hand in hand with the confusion that surrounds the role of SWA on campus. In her interview, Beach Girl discussed how she felt her Deputy Athletic Director title was more understood in her athletic department than her SWA designation. She said, “I think because I have the Deputy Athletic Director title, they recognize my level of expertise and leadership ability and see me as almost, like, the go-to person in [the athletic director’s] stead... But I think for some people and again, not across the board, but for some people, it is she is the Title IX person.”

Inconsistency in titles is not the only type of inconsistency that leads confusion. Institutional variation and athletic director leadership also play a large role in how participants experience their role as SWA differently. Jamie discussed just how much influence an athletic director has on the SWA designation during her interview. She said, “That's one of the things I think people get the drawback on SWA. It's different at every institution. It's kind of up to them, the athletic director, how they see it and how they want it to be. So, some people like me, they have very robust roles very, you know, they involved in a lot of things, but then there are SWAs where their athletic director doesn't involve them, and they're not at the table making these decisions. They have no input.”

Jamie’s mention of some SWAs not being involved with decision-making at their institutions due to the leadership of their athletic director fits well with Hancock and Hums’ (2016) idea of homologous reproduction. Homologous reproduction alludes to the fact that people are more likely to hire people with similar characteristics to them (Kanter, 1977). It was mentioned in the literature review that homologous reproduction in an athletic department would mean that men are more likely to hire other men into leadership roles within the department, rather than hiring a woman. This type of “reproduction” or hiring practice in an athletic

department can be a double-edged sword. Hancock and Hums' (2016) put it best when they said "the lack of female representation in executive levels of management perpetuates the stereotype that women are not capable or qualified for substantive leadership roles" (p. 204).

While homologous reproduction is not an inconsistency in athletics – based on existing data on women in leadership roles, it seems to be rather consistent – it is something that leads to inconsistent experiences for women in leadership roles, such as those who serve as SWA. If leadership roles are mostly being experienced by men, women who *do* serve in them will rely on those men to define their roles and provide guidelines for job duties. Janet, who recently experienced a change in athletic director at her institution spoke about this during her interview. Instead of having too few women in leadership roles, though, she mentioned the hiring of multiple women onto the executive leadership team, making it difficult for her to discern whether she was still truly the highest-ranking female in the athletic department. She said, "I think he needs to define it a little better, but I look at [another female staff member] as his right-hand person so, you know, am I still the "highest-ranking female?" I don't know that I necessarily look at myself that way, but I am definitely the individual that's involved with the [conference] SWA group and still that designation that allows me all those opportunities on a national level."

Misperceptions

It is relatively easy to place a correlation on inconsistency and misperception when it comes to the SWA role. Misperceptions were one of the most frequent mentioned downsides or drawbacks of the SWA designation during participant interviews. Some misperceptions can be traced to the very beginning of the SWA designation. The SWA designation was initially referred to as the Primary Woman Administrator (PWA), and was put in place to ensure the

oversight of women's sports during the NCAA's takeover of the AIAW. The PWA designation was not gender based, and a man or a woman could fill the role. In 1989, however, the PWA evolved into the gender-based SWA position as we know it today. As a reminder, it the designation was created in an effort to help "athletic programs to establish a minimum number of women serving within governance bodies" (Wells et al., 2020b, para. 1). As defined by the NCAA (2018a), the modern SWA designation serves to signify "the highest-ranking female involved with the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletic program" (Wells et al., 2020a, p. 1).

Because of the way the SWA came to be, its evolution over time has stalled in some ways. Several participants pointed to the fact that because the designation is "Senior Woman Administrator," it is often assumed that they only oversee women's sports. During our interview, Janet reflected on whether student-athletes knew what she did as SWA. She said:

> If I told students I was the SWA they would say, "I don't know what that stands for." Oh, if I told them it means senior woman administrator, they would go "oh, so you oversee all the women's programs." No. I have to explain to them that it's, you know, that what it means is that I am the highest-ranking female within the athletics department, which is an interesting scenario here right now because [my athletic director] just hired a female chief of staff. But to get back to your first question about student-athletes, I don't think they have the first clue.

Janet was not the only participant to have this sort of reflection, and for every participant, the misperceptions did not stop at student-athletes.

Many participants described confusion from coaches, other athletic department staff, and even upper-level university leadership (e.g. university presidents and provosts). Cheryl pointed

out that while university presidents are typically the people who hire athletic directors to a university, they do not always have a good grasp of what an SWA is, which is unfortunate because many SWAs aspire to become athletic directors. Cheryl said, “For your entire career as an athletics department employee, you’re applying to jobs with people who have done what you do. The one time you’re trying to obtain the highest position you can (the athletic director role), you’re applying for a job with people [on campus, like university presidents and trustees] who are going to review it that have no idea what you’ve done for your entire career. And it’s like, how you do you describe to someone that you are the highest-ranking senior woman? Like a college president, a provost, a legal counsel – they may or may not have any concept of what you have done in your career and so that title could hurt or it could help – it just depends.”

Cheryl’s account of confusion was not unlike misperceptions that other participants have experienced. Many discussed the danger of being “pigeonholed” into oversight of only women’s sports. As Barbara thought about some of the challenges she’s faced as an SWA, she said, “I think the challenges are just the pigeonhole perception of what an SWA does. The assumption that SWA only handles things that pertain to women, women's sports. I think that's the challenge. And then just again, the underutilization of the reach of an SWA within the conference and national infrastructure.”

The danger of being pigeonholed into “only women’s sports” for women who serve as SWA is that most of the highest positions of power in an athletic department, such as athletic director, require some sort of involvement or oversight of revenue-generating sports like football and men’s basketball. Beach Girl mentioned this outright in our discussion and said, “if we look long term, I do think women have to be able to branch out and oversee football for just for, you know, God forbid, a woman doesn't know how to oversee football because you know, a dollar is

different in football than it is in soccer." While her comment was stated in a sarcastic tone, it really highlighted some of the frustrations experienced by SWAs when it comes to misperceptions around their role.

The Ugly

As we consider the final section of the findings, it's important to denote that "the ugly" refers to what needs to happen in the future for the SWA designation to remain relevant and influential. This section is being referred to as "the ugly" for two reasons: 1) it is the obvious follow up to "the good" and "the bad" and 2) change is something that can be considered ugly while it is happening. When thinking of evolution, a quote by Cynthia Occelli comes to mind that perfectly describes the process of change: "For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. To someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction." We are at the stage of evolution of the SWA designation where everything must come completely undone – the shell has cracked.

In order to achieve true change, it is important to examine how "the good" can overpower "the bad." There are so many opportunities the SWA designation has afforded the women who serve in it since its inception – providing seats at the table, credibility, getting women into rooms where decisions are made at conference and national levels. Two ways to ensure long-term success of the SWA designation, and ultimately, the women who serve in it, are: 1) to have courageous leaders in place at universities and within athletic departments, and 2) to guarantee oversight of revenue-generating sports to SWAs.

In my discussion with Jamie, she placed a huge emphasis on the leadership of the athletic director when she reflected on whether members of the athletic department understood her role

as SWA. She said, “I can't say enough about that, but the Athletic Director, and I think this is in any case, but how the athletic director communicates about the SWA is so important because they set the tone throughout the department. And what was done here is, you know, “this is the SWA, this is what she's gonna do, this is what I've asked her to do,” you know, kind of that constant acknowledgement of that.”

This type of direct support from an athletic director can help to ensure the support and respect of the rest of the athletic department – from staff to coaches to student-athletes. It is vital for leaders to consistently educate their athletic department on what the SWA is and how the designation contributes to the success of the departments. This messaging must be clear that the SWA’s contributions lead to the success of *all* student-athletes, coaches, and staff, and not just women’s sports.

Janet mentioned outright in her interview that her sport assignments enhance her role. She said, “Yes. 100%. I had men’s and women’s basketball previously, and I mean, I think in every way I can look at it [it enhances my roll]… But as far as enhancing my career within the department or even with… to have, you know, an entire department and the football program understand that there is a female in the department that is also involved in football, is, I think, is really impactful for them, too.” Her statement suggests that the positive consequence of her oversight of football is not just personal, it extends to the student-athletes and staff as well.

Ensuring that SWAs have oversight of revenue-generating sport also helps to solve an issue of underrepresentation of women in more external facing roles. While sport oversight is not external facing, revenue-generating sports such as football and men’s basketball do tend to have more external involvement due to their visibility. Combining revenue-generating sport oversight

responsibilities for SWAs with other sport oversight could also help lead to more visibility for non-revenue-generating sports, which are typically predominantly women's sports.

Implications

The implications from this study's findings were both specific and indirect. They focus largely on the need for change within individual athletic departments and the broader landscape of college athletics. As such, the implications are broken down into two categories: 1) Individual Athletics Departments and 2) NCAA College Athletics Landscape.

Individual Athletics Departments

In Chapter 2, the gap that exists between men and women in positions of power in athletics at every level was discussed. Specifically, we examined Eagly and Karau's (2002) work on role congruity theory, which suggests that women in leadership roles are subject to prejudices because leadership skills are more generally attributed to men. A key piece that was discovered in the findings of this research was that the leadership style of the athletic director plays such a vital role to the self-perception of power of women serving as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States. The leadership of the athletic director, as described by several participants, is what can make or break an experience. In order to create more consistency across the board for women serving as SWA, it is vital for athletic directors to not only understand the role of the SWA, but to also hold the role in high regard – regardless of whether the athletic director is male or female. Ensuring that women serving as SWA have primary or secondary oversight of *at least one* revenue sport (most commonly men's basketball, women's basketball, and football) is a distinct way athletic directors can ensure the importance of this role.

As mentioned in the literature, McCartney (2007) found that institutional climate and culture can lead to stereotyping that "associate[s] leadership with maleness" (Bolman & Deal,

2003, p. 347). McCartney's (2007) findings directly relate to Whisenant's (2002) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which suggests that masculinity is the preferred characteristic for leadership. In her interview, Beach Girl made a direct comment about the lack of women in sport oversight roles for revenue sports. She said, "But if we look long term, I do think women have to be able to branch out and oversee football for just for, you know, God forbid, a woman doesn't know how to oversee football because you know, a dollar is different in football than it is in soccer." Ensuring that women – not just the SWA – have primary or secondary oversight of revenue sports can help to battle the hegemonic masculinity we see within athletic departments, especially when given oversight of male revenue sports.

Another way to ensure the evolution of the SWA designation, and therefore the continued development of the women who serve in it, is to put more women in leadership roles in athletics. While McCartney's (2007) concept of the lack of critical mass focused broadly on women in higher education, it is directly applicable to the findings of this research in athletics as well. Women must be *in* leadership roles within athletic departments in order to employ any type of power as explained by Frrench and Raven (1959), as nearly all those types of power rely on position and status in the first place. Without being in positions of authority, women would need to rely on connection power, as defined by Hersey et al. (1979) which relies on "connections with influential or important people" (p. 419). Connection power can only be successful form of power if a person's network includes influential or important people. For women serving as SWA, we know their networks can be subject to various forms of isolation that their male counterparts do not experience as often (Katz et al., 2018).

This research extends the work of Katz et al. (2018) and suggests that battling network isolation can start within individual athletic departments. By moving away from the single,

gender-based SWA designation and into a more ratio-based approach to ensuring women are in leadership roles, athletic departments can improve critical mass of women in leadership roles and help to build a network on their on campus. Athletic directors – and campus officials – must examine the makeup of their student-athlete population and work to hire a staff that is representative of that population. This means having a staff – coaches, graduate assistants, administrators, and otherwise – that *looks* like the student-athletes it serves from all standpoints (gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.). Hiring a ratio equivalent amount of women into leadership roles will allow individual athletic departments to move past having *at least one* woman in a leadership role to ensuring that there are multiple women in leadership roles.

NCAA College Athletics Landscape

In addition to individual athletic departments, change must happen at the national level for it to truly have a widespread impact. The NCAA must work to do two things: 1) clearly define the role for all divisions and 2) make the designation a requirement on every campus. As it stands, the NCAA has utilized a very broad definition for SWA across all divisions. In its manual, the NCAA defines SWA as "the highest-ranking female involved with the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletic program" (NCAA, 2018a, p. 18). This definition is no different than if the manual were to define an athletic director – which it does not – and yet it remains a part of the yearly rules manual. Chapter 2 made mention of the work of Wells et al. (2020a), which stated that the NCAA's definition and lack of job description for an SWA has led to decision-making power being discounted in some ways. The findings of this research suggests that rather than maintaining the gender-based definition of SWA, the NCAA should clearly define it as a role – not unlike the way it has defined other roles in the athletic department such as head coaches, assistants, and graduate assistants. Clearly defining what the SWA designation

is and what the designee's job responsibilities are can help to alleviate so much of the confusion participants discussed during their interviews.

The confusion that surrounds the role has led to misperceptions about not only the designation, but also the women who hold it. One misconception that exists as pointed out in the NCAA's 2017 Optimization of the Senior Woman Administrator Designation report is that the he SWA designation is not a requirement. The report distinctly points out that the "NCAA Constitution defines the term, and does not technically require an institution to have an SWA" (NCAA, 2018b, p. 9). This confusion plays a major role in the misperceptions that exist surrounding the SWA designation and has impacted growth in leadership roles for women in collegiate athletics.

The NCAA must move from simply defining the SWA as a designation athletic directors can choose to have to a required designation on all campuses, regardless of division. In Chapter 2, it was mentioned that as of 2018, only nine percent of SWAs at the NCAA Division I level oversee men's basketball and/or football (NCAA, 2018b). This acceptance of the status quo in college athletics is what leads to hegemonic masculinity (Whisenant et al., 2002). The status quo, in return is what leads to typical organizational hierarchy and perpetuates the gendered hegemony that impacts the advancement of women (Chliwniak, 1997). This research suggests that the NCAA should move to clearly define the role of the SWA to something such as: a high-ranking female member of the executive leadership team in an athletic department who oversees gender equity and Title IX legislation, as well as primary or secondary oversight of football (or men's basketball at schools that do not have football). While this is still a gender-based approach for a single position, it provides clarity for what the SWA should have oversight of as well as

ensuring that she is involved with the leadership of at least one of the institution's major revenue sports.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include participants confirming their experiences via email, rather than via video call. Email was utilized due to time constraints of participants, who were actively traveling to attend various conferences as a part of their duties during the data collection period. Although all responded to the email correspondence (Appendix E), some simply replied that the outlined themes aligned with their experiences, while others added additional thoughts and comments. This was limiting in that the researcher did not follow up again for further explanation due to the aforementioned time constraints.

Additionally, the study only examined the experiences of eight women, eight of whom served at FBS institutions, who served at NCAA Division I institutions. Therefore, the results of this research study may not be indicative of the experiences of other women serving as SWA at FCS, Division II, or Division III institutions.

Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, there are a variety of options for future studies. As mentioned in the limitations, this study only focused on the experiences of women serving as SWA at NCAA Division I institutions. There are a variety of divisions and institutional sizes (e.g. Division I, Division II, Division III, FBS, FCS, P5, or non-P5, etc.) that factor into the experience of an SWA. Future studies could examine the experiences of women at varying divisional level (e.g. perceptions of women serving as SWA at *only* Division II schools). These divisional differences could provide more insight into this study's findings of inconsistency and misperceptions.

Another variable that was not exclusively explored in this study is race and ethnicity. While they were outlined in the findings as a way to show diversity in the study and also to demonstrate how race and ethnicity may also impact the lived experiences of participants, these demographics were not explored in a way that examined the impact they may have on a participant's lived experience as SWA. Specifically, exploring how race and ethnicity similarities and differences between an SWA and her athletic director could impact or influence the experience she has as SWA (e.g. Black SWA with a white, male athletic director).

Finally, this research study only explored the experiences and perceptions of SWAs. Future studies may be interested in exploring perceptions of athletic directors, coaches, athletic department staff, and student-athletes in tandem with the perceptions of SWAs. Information gained from a study like that would provide a more holistic view of the true power – decision-making and otherwise – that women who serve as SWAs hold.

Concluding Thoughts

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological design to capture the essence of the lived experiences of women serving as SWAs at NCAA Division I institution in the United States. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to co-create meaning with the study participants as they shared insight on their experiences as SWAs. As stated in the literature, the submerging of the AIAW into the NCAA brought on a significant loss of control of women's sports for women in leadership roles (McCartney, 2007). The impact on women in leadership roles seemed to be an oversight by the NCAA during their takeover, as it set women up to be underrepresented in leadership roles for decades to come. In their attempt toward damage control, so to speak, the SWA designation was created. For several participants, the feeling of being a secondary thought seemed to still be relevant today. Barbara repeatedly

mentioned during her interview that she felt underutilized in her role as SWA. Cheryl and Janet were both navigating new athletic directors and mentioned their role as SWA was evolving.

Based on the findings of this study, the constant evolution of the SWA designation is not always one that is helpful. Rather than evolving the role from its gender-based origin into more executive leadership roles for women in athletics, the SWA designation has ensured that there will be at least *one* woman in a leadership role in athletics. Not an amount that is representative of the student-athlete population, but "at least one." Things like the acceptance athletics as a majority-male space is part of what has led to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in college athletics, and, inevitably, the formation of what many refer to as the "good ol' boys network" (Mechels-Struby, 2013; Rhode & Walker, 2008).

It is unacceptable to accept athletics as a majority-male space when, in reality, it is not. In the literature, participation rates over time were discussed. It was mentioned that the total number of NCAA sponsored men's sports programs has essentially stayed the same since 1982 (2,778 programs in 1982 vs. 2,989 programs in 2020), only noting a 7.5 percent increase over time. The number of NCAA sponsored women's sports programs, however, has nearly doubled across 40 years jumping from 1,767 programs in 1982 to 3,672 or 108 percent (NCAA, 2020). With increases in participation for women and girls in sport essentially since the passage of Title IX in 1972, it does not make sense that women in leadership roles in athletics should not be following the same trend. The aforementioned data beg the question: why? The acceptance of homologous reproduction and hegemonic masculinity in athletics is a key reason. The idea that male is the standard in these spaces must change – in a broad and sweeping way.

It is worth noting that prior to the completion of interviews for this study, it was intended to be titled, "From Designation to Stagnation." While there is still some truth to that title, it

evolved to “Designation, Stagnation, and Representation” following the data collection process to be more holistically reflective of the experiences of participants. A pre-conceived notion of the researcher was that the designation was not necessary in today’s landscape of college athletics – that it was outdated and largely not useful. However, with each participant interview, the researcher discovered just how necessary the designation remains. Participants’ mentions of the misperceptions that still exist today and the idea that women may not be hired if not for the designation made it glaringly obvious that, at a minimum, something like it is still needed.

As mentioned in the literature, it is important to challenge the status quo and ensure that women are not only be represented at the highest levels but heard. Wells et al. (2020b) stated that “having a gendered distinction like SWA does not protect women from gendered inequities; in fact, it reemphasizes the imbalance of power to what becomes the normalized, mostly male, alternative” (n.p.). This study proved that the gendered distinction is part of what leads to inconsistency and misperceptions about the designation. Rather than including a designation that identifies the highest-ranking female in an athletic department, intercollegiate athletics should focus on reevaluating the systems that perpetuate a lack of women in leadership roles within NCAA member institutions across all divisions. The NCAA often emphasizes fairness and inclusivity when discussing the environment it strives to provide for student-athletes. It is time that mission included staff, as well.

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APPENDIX A

Initial Recruitment Correspondence

Hello,

I am pursuing my doctoral degree in the Curriculum and Instruction program at the University of South Florida, with a focus in Higher Education Administration. Currently, I am in the process of recruiting participants to partake in my study entitled From Designation to Stagnation: A Qualitative Exploration of Self-Perception of Power Among NCAA Division I Senior Woman Administrators.

The purpose of my research is to understand the self-reported experiences of women serving in the SWA role at NCAA Division institutions in the United States. I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

a. currently serve in the SWA role
b. work at an NCAA Division I institution in the United States, and
c. have served as SWA for at least two years prior to start of this study

If you or anyone you know meet(s) these criteria and would be interested please have them complete the survey through the link below. If there are any questions, please email me directly at tonion@usf.edu, and I will answer any questions about the process. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Pre-Participation Survey Link

Sincerely,

Tayler Onion

APPENDIX B

Follow-up Recruitment Correspondence

Hi,

Thank you for filling out the Pre-Participation Survey Link for my dissertation study! First, I'd like to formally e-introduce myself – my name is Tayler Onion, and as a reminder, my study is titled *From Designation to Stagnation: A Qualitative Exploration of Self-Perception of Power Among NCAA Division I Senior Woman Administrators*. It explores the self-perceived power of women serving as SWAs at NCAA Division I institutions in the United States.

I would like to move forward with scheduling a 60-minute interview for us to discuss your experiences more in-depth. I'm including a link to my calendar below, please feel free to choose a date and time that work best with your schedule.

https://calendly.com/tayler-onion/dissertation-interview

Looking forward to chatting more. Thank you for your willingness to participate!

Sincerely,

Tayler Onion

APPENDIX C

Pre-Interview Survey

Survey Description:

This survey is to be completed by individuals interested in participating in research to fulfill dissertation requirements. The research topic is: Perceptions of Power Among Female Athletic Administrators Serving in the SWA Designation at NCAA Division I Institutions in the United States. If you are interested in participating, please complete the survey below. Selected participants will be contacted via email to confirm their participation in this study.

Questions:

1. Name (First Name, Last Name)
2. What is your email address?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your race?
5. Do you currently serve as an SWA at an NCAA Division I institution in the United States?
6. How long have you served as an SWA?
7. What size is the school at which you work?
    a. FCS
    b. FBS, Power 5
    c. FBS, non-Power 5

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Topic: Perceptions of Power Among Female Athletic Administrators Serving in the SWA Designation at NCAA Division I Institutions in the United States

Opening Script:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this qualitative research. Before we get started, I will provide some context on the project. I am completing this research as a requirement for my Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida. As someone who has worked in and around college athletics in various capacities since 2009, this topic is of great interest to me. It is my intent to gather information on the lived experiences of women serving in the SWA role at NCAA Division I institutions in an effort to capture the essence of that experience.

Demographic Questions:

1. To ensure anonymity, this study will utilize pseudonyms to identify each participant.

   What name would you like to use?

2. What is your current title in addition to your SWA designation?

3. What is your level of education?

4. How many years have you served as the SWA at your institution?

Research Question 1: How does the administrator in the SWA role perceive her overall experience in the role?

1. As the SWA at your institution, tell me about your perception of your role.
   a. What is your perception of your athletic director's view of your role?
   b. What is your perception of the student-athletes' view of your role?
   c. What is your perception of the coaches' view of your role?

d. What is your perception of athletic department staffs' view of your role?

Research Question 2: How does the SWA perceive the overall power of her designation?

1. Please describe your job duties and responsibilities.
    a. Do you feel the SWA designation is necessary to complete your job duties?
2. Discuss the challenges and successes of holding the SWA designation at your institution.
3. Do you feel you are truly the highest-ranking female in your athletic department?
4. On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the highest – how much power do you feel you have in your department?

Research Question 3: Does the administrator in the SWA role perceive herself to have true decision-making power within the athletic department?

1. Do you feel you have true decision-making power within the athletic department?
2. Do you have any sport oversight? If so, please share the sports and what that looks like as a part of your job duties.
    a. Do you feel your sport assignments enhance your role?

Research Question 4: How do administrators in the SWA role perceive the designation to add value to the athletic department?

1. What are ways in which the SWA role adds value to your athletic department?
2. How do you feel the SWA designation has impacted (or will impact) your career trajectory?

3. Do you see any parallels between the Chief Diversity Officer designation and the SWA designation?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to add to help me better understand your experiences as the SWA at your institution?

Closing Script:

Thank you for your time today. Once I complete my overall analysis of the data, I will be reaching back out to gather your feedback on my findings. That will likely be a shorter meeting. Is that something you'd be willing to do?

*Thank again regardless of the answer to willingness to participate in member checks.

APPENDIX E

Post-Interview Follow-up Email

Hi,

I wanted to send a note to say thank you again for taking the time out of your schedule to participate in an interview for my dissertation research. In the interest of time, I'm following up on my findings via email. Below you'll see the major themes that emerged from the data. My ask of you at this point is two-fold: 1) **Please reply to this email by Friday, July 1, and let me know if these themes align with your lived experience(s) as SWA**; and 2) Please share any additional thoughts you may have about the themes as they relate to your individual experience as an SWA.

Emerged Themes:

1. **The Designation for Representation**
    a. Discusses the importance of having the designation to ensure diversity of thought in leadership roles at NCAA Division I institutions, as well as providing representation in leadership roles for the next generation of leaders. Finally, this theme outlines the feeling that the designation is unnecessary as it relates to completing job duties, but necessary in terms of diverse hiring practices (e.g. ensuring women are in at least one leadership role in athletic departments).

2. **Consistently Inconsistent**
    a. Discusses various inconsistencies experienced by women serving as SWA from institution size (FBS v. FCS and Power 5 vs. non-Power 5) to athletic director leadership to internal and external misperceptions about the designation.

3. **Inherent Power**
    a. Discusses the inherent power associated with being an SWA, such as inclusion in NCAA and conference governance. Additionally, this theme outlines the level of respect and stature most participants described they felt as a result of holding the designation at their institution. Finally, this theme discusses the potential for pigeonholing of women who serve in the role (e.g. only having Title IX or gender equity duties or only overseeing women's sports).

Thanks again for your help in this!

Sincerely,

Tayler Onion

APPENDIX F

IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

April 25, 2022

Tayler Onion
[redacted]

Dear Ms. Tayler Onion:

On 4/22/2022, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY004176
Review Type:	Exempt 2
Title:	From Designation to Stagnation: A Qualitative Exploration of the Self-Perception of Power Among NCAA Division I Senior Woman Administrators
Protocol:	• HRP-503a - Onion 3.0;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

Sincerely,

Jennifer Walker
IRB Research Compliance Administrator