An Inside Look at Division I and Division III College Athletic Directors

Introduction

Division I and Division III athletic directors both hold the same job title, and to a large extent, the demographic profile of both groups of individuals is remarkably similar. However, despite the same job title and the similar demographic profile, there are many important differences between the two positions.

Among the major differences between the two positions are the responsibilities of each job, the size of the athletic department staff, the attention by fans and media, and the compensation. While greatly simplifying another difference between the two positions, a substantial and important factor is the “R” word – revenue.

For the Division I athletic director, this means his or her job responsibilities include management of television contracts, marketing and sponsorship contracts, ticket sales, etc. While Division III athletic directors may spend some time on some of the aforementioned items, the scope differs greatly.

Division III athletic directors spend a much greater portion of their time directly managing their coaches and athletic teams. Division I athletic directors typically assign associate and assistant athletic directors to supervise most of their athletic teams.

An extensive database has been researched and compiled with current information about Division I and Division III athletic directors. This database includes information about gender, ethnicity, education, business experience and previous experience as an athletic director, among other data points. There has also been an attempt to obtain historical information about athletic directors. That effort was fairly successful with Division I athletic directors, but information on Division III athletic directors was much harder to find.
This database shows that Division I athletic directors tend to be older, more experienced [in terms of having previously held the position of athletic director at another institution], more racially diverse, less gender diverse and just about as educated as their Division III counterparts. Division I athletic directors were also generally hired to the position at an older age and have held the position for a fewer number of years.

Research Questions

In recent years, Division I institutions have responded to the importance of revenue generation by placing a greater focus on hiring individuals with the related business skills and experience to manage their athletic departments. Division III institutions have faced the need to hire an athletic director with the wide variety of skills and experiences to handle the various demands of the position.

These trends raise the question that if the job of the athletic director has changed, has the type of person hired to be an athletic director also changed? The profile and experiences of those hired as athletic directors will provide a look at what institutions value about their athletic programs.

A comparison of Division I and Division III athletic directors will highlight the different characteristics and experiences that are common to each group. For example, it will answer questions such as, “Do Division I athletic directors have more business experience than their Division III counterparts?” or “Are Division III athletic directors more likely to have previously held a head coaching position?” Altogether, the answers to these and other questions will help build a profile of athletic directors at both levels.

The seeds for this line of research were planted with The Comprehensive Guide to Careers in Sports (2008). This led to more in-depth research of leadership positions, beginning with professional team sports. This research culminated with three articles about general managers in Major League Baseball, the NBA and the NFL.

The next subjects in this line of research were college athletic directors, at both the Division I and Division III levels. So far, this has led to two articles, one about athletic directors in each Division.

It has emerged from all five of these articles that there is not one way to the top – to that coveted leadership position in sports. Instead, there are various career paths or career tracks to those positions.

This article will provide and compare the relevant demographic profiles of Division I and Division III athletic directors, with a focus on the key differences. Information found on the publicly available websites of NCAA Division I and Division III athletic departments will be used to highlight these key differences. The comprehensive data set from which these profiles have been built consists of 348 current Division I and 441 current Division III athletic directors.

What does today’s athletic director look like?

Age Distribution

The average age of current Division I athletic directors is 52.2 years old. Similarly, the average age of current Division III athletic directors is 50.9 years old.

Age at Which Athletic Director was Hired to Current Position

A previous article published in the *SportsBusiness Journal* titled “The Path to the Athletic Director’s Office,” referred to a phenomenon termed the “Theo Effect.” The hiring of Theo Epstein as general manager of the Boston Red Sox at the age of 28 was emblematic of this effect. Following Epstein’s success in leading the Red Sox to two World Series titles in four years,
other Major League Baseball clubs hired young general managers with similar backgrounds in analytics.

The “Theo effect” was introduced in the *SportsBusiness Journal* article to help illustrate the fact that Division I institutions had not experienced a similar trend with the hiring of younger individuals to fill the position of athletic director. The same is true for Division III institutions.

The average age of Division I athletic directors at the time of their hire to their current position was 45.3 years old. This compares to an average age of 42.1 years old for Division III athletic directors at the time of their hire to their current position. This disparity highlights the premium that Division I institutions place on age and experience as factors in hiring an athletic director.

### Number of Years on the Job

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Not surprisingly, on average, Division I athletic directors are shorter-tenured than their Division III counterparts. Division I athletic directors have been on the job for an average of 6.78 years. Division III athletic directors have held the position for an average of 8.92 years.

These figures reflect the relative lack of job security for Division I athletic directors compared to their Division III counterparts. The pressure to produce winning programs quickly, along with the increasing focus on revenue generation are two factors that likely contribute to the higher turnover rate among Division I athletic directors.

### Previous AD Experience

While it is clear that Division I and Division III institutions are hiring older individuals to the position of athletic director, it is also important to examine the previous experience of those administrators. Specifically, it will be useful to examine whether or not previous experience as an athletic director at another institution is a common qualification of current Division I and/or Division III athletic directors.

This seems to be the case in Division I, as 39% of current athletic directors previously held the same position at another institution. By comparison, 21% of Division III athletic directors previously held the position at another institution.

### Race

Despite modest gains over the past several decades, it remains a challenging time for minorities in Division I and Division III athletics. Currently, 83% of Division I athletic directors are Caucasian, 14% are African-American, 2% are Hispanic and 1% are Asian.

Comparatively, the racial profile of Division III athletic directors is less diverse, as 93% of Division III athletic directors are Caucasian. Another 5% of current Division III athletic directors are African-American, while 1% are Hispanic and 0.2% are Asian.

However, neither Division is making particularly rapid strides towards racial diversity. Since 2010, minorities represent 21% of athletic directors hired at the Division I level and just 8% of athletic directors hired at the Division III level.
Gender

One of the areas in which Division III would appear to be ahead of Division I is in terms of gender equity among athletic directors. While 29% of current athletic directors at the Division III level are female, that figure drops to just 9% at the Division I level. Among the Power Five Division I conferences, there are just two female athletic directors.

Furthermore, these figures have remained relatively stable over the past several years, as 29% of Division III athletic directors and 8% of Division I athletic directors hired since 2010 were female.

Graduate Degrees

It may not be surprising that institutions of higher education would place a strong emphasis on educational qualifications in the hiring of an athletic director. This idea is supported by the fact that 80% of Division I and 79% of Division III athletic directors hold an advanced degree.

The type and subject of advanced degree varies widely among current Division I and Division III athletic directors. With regard to the type of degree earned, 13% of Division I athletic directors hold an MBA, 11% hold a PhD and 6% earned a JD. Some of the most common subject fields will be addressed later in the career paths section of this article.

In comparison, 7% of current Division III athletic directors hold an MBA, 6% hold a PhD and 1% earned a JD. The higher prevalence of MBA degrees among Division I athletic directors especially supports the trend of Division I institutions placing a greater emphasis on formal business experience and/or training in hiring an athletic director.

Career Tracks

A review of this research has identified several common paths that current Division I and Division III athletic directors have taken to arrive in their positions. While this list of career paths is not exhaustive, each path represents a group of similar ways in which athletic directors have risen to the job.

The differences in the career tracks of Division I and Division III athletic directors can also provide an important look into what institutions at each level value in the leadership of their athletic programs.

Head Coach Track

While at one time a head coaching position was nearly always a part of the career path of both Division I and III athletic directors, this particular career track is changing rapidly. It has become far more common for a Division III athletic director to have held a head coaching position. 67% of current Division III athletic directors were a collegiate head coach at some point in their career. In comparison, only 22% of current Division I athletic directors have held the position of head coach.

Barry Alvarez of the University of Wisconsin and Mike Holder of Oklahoma State University are two current Division I athletic directors with a background in coaching. Alvarez, a member of the College Football Hall of Fame, was a 16-year head coach at Wisconsin before being named athletic director in 2004. Holder, an eight-time national champion as head coach of the men's golf team at Oklahoma State, took over the position of athletic director after a 32-year head coaching career.

Charlie Titus of UMass Boston is one current Division III athletic director with significant head coaching experience. Titus has spent 38 years as the men's basketball coach at UMass Boston, and was named the athletic director in 1980. Lisa Melendy, a 17-year head coach of women's soccer, is another current Division III athletic director with a background in coaching. Melendy was hired as the athletic director at Williams College in 2011.

62% of Division III ADs were a collegiate coach at some point in their career, compared to only 22% of Division I ADs

Athletic Administration Track

One of the career tracks that remains fairly prevalent among Division I athletic directors is the “athletic administration track.” Athletic directors that followed this track generally gained skills and experience by working their way up through an athletic department. These individuals hold a variety of roles in the athletic department throughout their career and are able to gain a broad range of skills necessary to sit in the athletic director's chair.
While this career track does exist in Division III, it is markedly less prevalent among current athletic directors. This is likely due to the fact that Division III athletic departments are often much smaller than their Division I counterparts. Fewer staff positions means fewer opportunities for administrators to develop their skills internally.

Kirby Hocutt of Texas Tech University and NACDA 3rd Vice President Bubba Cunningham of the University of North Carolina are two current Division I athletic directors that advanced through this track. Hocutt worked his way up through external operations and development before being named athletic director at Ohio University, the University of Miami and eventually Texas Tech. Cunningham gained experience in finance, facilities and marketing at Notre Dame before being named athletic director at Ball State University, the University of Tulsa and North Carolina.

One Division III athletic director that represents this career track is Joe Bednarsh, athletic director at Yeshiva University. Bednarsh was hired in the athletic department at Yeshiva as a lifeguard in 1991, and after holding every position in the athletic department, he was named athletic director in 2006.

**Sport Management Education Track**

While some current Division I and Division III athletic directors have been able to advance through the athletic department track to earn the top job, many more athletic directors pursued graduate study in the field of sport management in order to prepare for their careers. Graduate programs in sport management provide individuals with the specialized knowledge and training to become managers in the sports industry.

Of current Division I athletic directors with an advanced degree, 40% earned it in the field of sport management. Comparatively, 20% of current Division III athletic directors hold an advanced degree in sport management.

As colleges and universities exist to uphold the mission of higher education, the prevalence of advanced degrees in education among those in leadership roles at these institutions is not surprising. 32% of current Division I athletic directors and 34% of current Division III athletic directors have earned an advanced degree in education. These figures also align well with the core values of the NCAA, which state that the NCAA is committed to “the pursuit of excellence in both academics and athletics.”

Sandy Barbour and Jeremy Foley are two current Division I athletic directors that earned advanced degrees in sport management. Barbour, athletic director at Penn State University, earned a master’s degree from the University of Massachusetts, while Foley, athletic director at the University of Florida, earned a master’s degree from Ohio University.

At the Division III level, Dana Harmon, athletic director at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and Josh MacArthur, athletic director at Babson College, each earned a master’s degree in sport management – Harmon from the University of Massachusetts, and MacArthur from the University of Richmond.

**Business Experience Track**

As revenue becomes increasingly important in college athletics, Division I institutions have begun to hire individuals with outside business experience to the position of athletic director. These business executives generally have a background in revenue generation, and the goal is for these individuals to help improve the financial health and stability of their athletic departments. About ten percent of current Division I athletic directors entered the position directly from an outside business.

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In Division III athletics, where revenue generation is far less important to the success of an athletic department, institutions have not placed the same emphasis on finding an athletic director with a background in revenue generation. However, given the uncertainty of the changing landscape of college athletics, a strong business, financial or legal background may be another important tool for those seeking the position of athletic director.

Two current Division I athletic directors with outside business experience are Dave Brandon of the University of Michigan and Pat Haden of the University of Southern California. Brandon served as the Chief Executive Officer of Domino’s immediately prior to his hiring as athletic director, while Haden was a practicing attorney and partner in a private equity firm before being hired as athletic director.

In recent years, several Division III institutions have also hired individuals with an outside business background to lead their athletic departments. In 2011, Louisiana College hired Darrell Payne, a former attorney and NFL and MLB player agent, as its athletic director. In 2013, Albertus Magnus College hired Jim Abromaitis as athletic director. Abromaitis had a background in banking, and had served most recently as executive director of Capital City Economic Development Authority in Hartford, Conn.
Sports Industry Experience Track

While college athletics is often seen as a unique segment of the sports industry, a number of current Division I and Division III athletic directors obtained sports industry business experience outside of college athletics. This career track has allowed athletic directors to transfer the skills acquired in managing professional and amateur sports organizations to successfully managing a college athletic department.

While being a student-athlete alone is not a path to becoming an athletic director, former student-athletes have followed each of the career tracks to arrive in the athletic director’s chair. 57% of current Division I athletic directors have experience as a student-athlete, compared to 58% of current athletic directors in Division III.

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Mollie Marcoux, athletic director at Princeton University and Bill Battle, athletic director at the University of Alabama are two Division I athletic directors with sports industry experience. Marcoux had a 19-year career in sports facility management at Chelsea Piers Management, while Battle founded and served as Chief Executive Officer of Collegiate Licensing Company prior to being named athletic director.

At the Division III level, Jessica Gould, who was named athletic director at Newbury College in 2010, previously served as an assistant vice president for the Special Olympics of Massachusetts. Gould also has extensive experience in the field of athletic event management. In 2014, Worcester State University hired Michael Mudd to the position of athletic director. Most recently, Mudd served as President of the Worcester Sharks of the American Hockey League, having previously held senior-level management positions with several minor-league hockey teams.

Collegiate Student-Athlete Track

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The experience of having been a student-athlete certainly allowed current athletic directors to become familiar with the environment and operation of an athletic department, providing knowledge that was likely very useful in embarking upon and navigating their path to the athletic director’s office.

Bernard Muir of Stanford University and Tom Jurich of the University of Louisville are two current Division I athletic directors that were student-athletes. Muir followed the sport management education track, earning a master’s degree in the field. Jurich was an NFL draft pick and after a brief coaching stint, pursued the department experience track as he worked his way up to first become athletic director at Northern Arizona University.

Dawn Stewart of Otterbein University and Tim Ryan of Bowdoin College are among the current Division III athletic directors that were student-athletes. Stewart pursued the sport management education track, having earned a master’s degree in the field. Ryan was named athletic director via the business track after beginning his career in the banking industry.

Putting the Research to Work

It is likely that this research into the backgrounds and career paths of current Division I and Division III athletic directors has a wide appeal across a range of college athletics stakeholders. However, there are several groups for which this information may be particularly useful.

Young, aspiring athletic directors may be able to use the trends identified in this information as a tool to help plan their careers. It may help identify and evaluate the relative importance of various career experiences and other relevant characteristics of current athletic directors, allowing young administrators to better adapt their strategies and intended path to the athletic director’s office.

Individuals looking for an entry point into collegiate athletics may also be able to use this information as a resource to better plan their careers. While entry into the specialized segment of college athletics may seem difficult, making use of this research may assist in identifying various ways to improve their chances of career advancement.

Institutions in the process of hiring an athletic director may be able to use this information to benchmark their own process with current trends in each Division. This research may help institutions to identify relevant factors in the background of potential athletic director candidates and to examine those factors against current athletic directors in each Division.

This research may also prove useful for educators looking to develop executive education programs. If the goal of executive education programs is to help individuals develop the skills and knowledge necessary to become an athletic
director, this research will help educators to identify exactly what factors are becoming more important in the hiring process.

Organizations such as the NCAA, the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) and the National Association of Collegiate Woman Athletics Administrators (NACWAA) may also find this information useful in effecting positive changes in college athletics. While some organizations have been able to use outside forces as a catalyst for change (such as the “Rooney Rule” in the National Football League), it is likely that significant changes in the demographic profile of Division I and Division III athletic directors will be brought on by these and other professional organizations with an interest in college athletics.

These organizations can help by identifying and developing talent in areas of need of improvement. If the current demographic profile is not satisfactory to these organizations, they can take steps to ensure that future generations of athletic administrators are a more diverse, experienced group. Many organizations currently employ an internship program to attract and train young administrators in college athletics. One way to attract and retain better talent is to make these internship programs more attractive. This could be accomplished by making sure interns have access to mentors, ensuring that interns are placed into entry-level jobs and increasing compensation. Finally, developing a pathway for mid-career individuals to break into college athletics may prove beneficial to these organizations in increasing the talent pool and diversity for future athletic director searches. If the ultimate goal is to attract more qualified people into college athletics administration, these organizations are well-positioned to play an important role in training and empowering those individuals on the path to the athletic director’s office.

Conclusion

Now that this database and a current profile for Division I and Division III athletic directors has been established, it will be interesting and informative to track future hires to the position of athletic director. Will the profile of Division I athletic directors change? Will the profile of Division III athletic directors change? Will the differences between the profiles of the two groups change?

While it will certainly be interesting to track the answers to these questions, it may in fact be more useful to track specific trends, such as racial and gender diversity, business experience or head coaching experience. Given the uncertainty around the long-term direction of intercollegiate athletics, tracking the trends in athletic director qualifications and characteristics will continue to provide a view into what institutions value in their athletic programs.