

Perceptions and Perspectives of Black Male Athletic Directors at National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Institutions

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship among self-identified Black male National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletic directors (ADs) and their lived experiences of career attainment through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This research examined both the factors impacting the ADs' careers and the strategies they used to overcome barriers. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with all of the Black male ADs in the FBS ($N=12$) regarding their perspectives of their lived experiences. The findings revealed three overarching dimensions (i.e., allyship, nepotism, and networking with other minority leaders) and seven emergent themes associated with success factors (i.e., diverse network, lack of privilege, mentorship, and cultural differences) and barrier removal strategies (i.e., intrinsic motivation, extensive experience, and intentional networking). This study advances the sport management field and CRT research by revealing insights into Black ADs' perceptions, challenges, opportunities, and career strategies.

Keywords: Intercollegiate athletics, athletic directors, Critical Race Theory, leadership, lived experiences

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is considered by many intercollegiate athletics onlookers and stakeholders to be the most important governing body in college sports. The NCAA, which has over 1,200 member colleges and universities and an annual budget of one billion dollars, has governing rules and policies that universities apply to their intercollegiate athletics departments. The athletic director (AD) at each member institution oversees and ensures that these rules are applied consistently. The AD position is often filled with search firms' assistance that parallels university executive, e.g., presidential, vacancies. Such a post in an NCAA Division I (D-I) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institution is considered a significant position in higher education, as FBS schools typically have the most resources and highest-profiled athletics programs. ADs at D-I FBS institutions commonly oversee operational budgets of over \$100 million at an Autonomy Conference school (i.e., Big Ten Conference, Southeastern Conference, Pac-12 Conference, Big 12 Conference, and Atlantic Coast Conference) and \$40 to \$60 million at a Group of Five Conference school (i.e., American Athletic Conference,

Suggested citation: Arthur, T. (2023). *Journal of Higher Education Athletics & Innovation*, 2(1), 69-96.

Conference USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, and Sun Belt Conference). The conferences that these Division I FBS schools hold membership in command billions of dollars annually from multimedia networks.

The prestige, notoriety, and revenues of the FBS universities' intercollegiate athletics departments add a great deal of pressure, risk, and excitement for the ADs who oversee these programs. The AD is the person directly responsible for oversight of the athletics department. In a continually shifting environment, the AD must manage large quantities of money and vast networks of people to lead change on micro and macro levels, from student-athlete experiences to coaching and staff evaluations. Many ADs increasingly hold the vice president's title, as they report directly to the president and are members of the university's senior staff. In addition to their work in their respective athletic departments, ADs must operate within a structure out of their control because they are governed by a conference and the NCAA. ADs, many of whom are former student-athletes, are often rewarded financially with an average salary of a million dollars annually.

While all ADs must deal with the challenges of their position regardless of their race or gender, Black ADs must overcome even more challenges due to the White hegemonic culture present in intercollegiate athletics. This hegemony can be traced over 130 years back. In 1892, Amos Alonzo Stagg became the first AD in the United States (U.S.) at the University of Chicago. Since then, the preponderance of ADs has been White males. In fact, in the 129-year history of intercollegiate athletics, there have never been more than 15 Black people to hold the AD's position at the top level in a given year; this is out of 130 D-I FBS schools. Within D-I FBS programs, Black student-athletes make up more than half of the student-athlete population in the high-profile sports of men's basketball and football. Yet, as the number of Black student-athletes increases, the number of opportunities to lead these departments has, for the most part, remained unchanged. Such a hegemonic structure has resulted in a lack of opportunity for Black ADs to lead these departments, and scholars need to examine this issue further. The structure that currently exists demands an in-depth examination of Black ADs through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to determine ways to challenge this power dynamic. CRT is a framework that examines society and culture as they relate to race, law, and power (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Since then, John Singer (2005a; 2005b) and other scholars have translated the CRT framework to sport management. Evaluating positions and stakeholders such as D-I FBS ADs through the lens of CRT allows for a greater understanding of African Americans' perspectives.

While much progress has been made with the inclusion of minority groups in sports participation, the leadership positions of head coach, vice president, AD, president, and owner continue to be overrepresented by White control and management (Coakley, 2021). The struggle continues in numerous professional fields for Black people to demonstrate their ability to lead complex organizations and succeed. Like other desirable leadership positions across the country, Black people have found it challenging to obtain leadership positions in professional and college sports. This discrimination, referred to as "occupational segregation" by Cunningham (2012, p. 166), involves a disproportionate racial/ethnic representation in certain occupations. Cunningham noted that "it will take concerted, systematic efforts" (p. 177) to bring about a transformation "where all persons, irrespective of their individual backgrounds and characteristics, have access to jobs and the possibility for advancement" (p. 177). To challenge the hegemonic structure in the

leadership of college athletics, Cooper et al. (2017) recommended that the NCAA require institutions that perpetually maintain disparities between their student-athletes' racial composition and their athletics leaders to create comprehensive diversity and racial equity action plans. Unfortunately, even for those who secure an AD position, the opportunity doesn't come without drawbacks, as Black ADs can be situated in unhealthy environments that challenge their identity within their predominantly White athletic departments (McDowell et al., 2009).

Literature Review

The Athletic Director's Skills in Intercollegiate Athletics

There has been limited research on Black AD written in articles (e.g., Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Singer & Cunningham, 2018) and dissertations/theses (e.g., Cheeks, 2016; Pointer, 2018; Swift, 2011; Wilson, 2022). For studies that do not intersect ADs with race, there has been significant empirical research (e.g., Branch, 1990; Fitzgerald et al., 1994; Greenberg & Evrard, 2016; Hardin et al., 2013; Hatfield et al., 1987; LeCrom & Pratt, 2016; Lumpkin et al., 2015; Peachey & Burton, 2011; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Schneider & Stier, 2005; Stier & Schneider, 2003). Similar to the role of CEOs, ADs act as the overseers of their respective athletic departments. Fundraising skills, contract negotiation, and experience in business operations have been found to be the most crucial in advancing to high profile AD positions (Kirkpatrick, 2018).

Overall, successful ADs have skills in budgeting, generating revenue, networking, leading, supervising, and goal setting. For the current study, *success* was operationally defined as the ability to be selected as a D-I FBS athletic director and to remain in this leadership position for more than two years. As the current study sought to examine the perspective and perceptions of Black male ADs at D-I FBS institutions, the theoretical foundation for this investigation involved an analysis of career development and advancement through the lens of a conceptual framework that reveals the systemic racism in all aspects of society, including the sport industry.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a process in which to view the career paths, experiences, and thoughts of racial minorities within their own stories. In essence, it acknowledges that racial and ethnic minorities see the world through a lens that appears to be different than the majority. Singer (2005a) provided an entry point in this area when he called for:

[S]port management professionals with an explication of the critical race theoretical framework as a starting point for demonstrating the significance of race and ethnicity as viable epistemological considerations in some of the research that is done in the dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study. (p. 475)

The CRT framework is appropriate for an analysis of ADs because it accounts for the intersection of race, culture, etc., within intercollegiate athletics (Bimper & Harrison, Jr., 2011; Harrison et al., 2013). As previously discussed, the AD serves as the major artery for securing funds for an athletics department. Discourse on sport is now inseparable from that of race (Bimper & Harrison, 2011). Intercollegiate athletics both shape and are shaped by social, moral, and economic culture. Access and opportunity to higher education and college sports have expanded for historically

marginalized groups since the civil rights and feminist movements. Through the lens of CRT, this seemingly progressive benevolence is investigated more thoroughly to explore how Black male bodies' commodification reinforces Whiteness as the norm.

CRT originated from a need to radically assess the culture of legal studies in order to revolutionize it (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1990). While the concept has been around for decades, CRT continues to be highly discussed by scholars (Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Shropshire, 2021). Scholars such as Cooper et al. (2017) have used CRT and explained its various tenets in their research on intercollegiate athletics. There are five tenets of CRT: interest convergence, Whiteness as property, the myth of colorblindness, the permanence of racism, and counterstorytelling. These tenets include aspects such as advocating for social justice and exposing the White hegemonic structure that society maintains. For instance, in terms of the permanence of racism, the application of CRT and intercollegiate athletics research has demonstrated that race and racism are endemic to predominately White institutions of higher education (Bimper, 2017). Therefore, more research is needed to understand how this marginalized population experiences these racialized environments. Since CRT acknowledges that racism is not dissolving soon, educational stakeholders who work with minority student-athletes can be most effective when they create positive learning environments for critical conversations about race and racism as early as middle school (Singer, 2016).

Inherent to CRT is acknowledging the people who have been silenced. People of Color's voices are not only necessary; they are required for a complete analysis of systemic racism in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT centralizes the perspectives of People of Color, especially through oral history and counterstorytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The research design is unique in that it offers an opportunity for minority participants to "insert their voice, reflect on their experiential knowledge through an engaging dialogue about the reality of race and racism" (Bimper, 2017, p. 189). Researchers have demonstrated that White and Black people are aware of the stereotype that Black male athletes are athletically superior and academically inferior to their White counterparts (Aronson, 2002; Briggs et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2017; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Harrison et al., 2011; Moskowitz & Carter, 2018; Stone et al., 1999). Apathy toward academic domains rarely stems from the Black male student-athletes' voices themselves (Cooper, 2016). To challenge the dominant narrative surrounding this common myth, researchers have employed counterstorytelling in their methodology to allow Black athletes a platform to voice their stories in their own words (Cooper, 2016; Lawrence, 2005; Singer, 2009, 2016). For CRT researchers, this methodology provides a *counter* to deficit-based storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT also reminds us that policies, laws, and practices that govern higher education can have intended and unintended consequences to keep past structures in place that have traditionally harmed – and continue to harm – People of Color (Ray, 2022). Critical race theorists have shown that the education system in the United States is key to reproducing structural racism. This structural racism can be witnessed in college and university settings, including intercollegiate athletic programs (Ray, 2022). Understanding how Black athletic directors maneuvered through these challenges will benefit future athletic directors.

CRT provides a framework to show how social constructs intersect to impact leaders of

color. The current study embraced CRT in its methodology, data analysis, and potential contribution to educational literature outside of the classroom for minorities in leadership roles within predominantly White contexts. The information gleaned from Division I FBS ADs provides a description of how they, as Black men, were able to advance into athletic director positions traditionally held by White men. CRT was used as a lens to understand the phenomena by using in-depth interviews as the qualitative study method.

The current study focused on the perspectives of Black male ADs and the lived experiences of some of the most powerful men in college sports. The lived experience of Black men and their stories are an important part of understanding Black male leadership, especially because they have the perspective of young student-athletes who have moved through academia, started their careers, and progressed to other roles and responsibilities. The focus on Black men rather than women recognizes the antecedent of gender. The importance of the Black female experience requires its own study that includes an analysis of the intersectionality of race and gender. These men were asked to provide a Black person's lens through a complex organizational structure of higher education in the U.S. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative in-depth phenomenological design was to investigate the relationship among self-identified Black male Division I FBS athletic directors and their lived experiences of upward mobility and career attainment of the athletic director position through the lens of CRT.

Black male Division I FBS athletics directors were chosen because of their presence in a White/male hegemonic setting and their unique responsibilities working in this hegemonic culture at D-I FBS level: demands regarding winning, media engagement, fundraising, and stakeholder interactions. To understand the challenges and strategies Black male ADs use, the current study examined the personal, social, institutional, and behavioral conditions that influenced the career opportunities and job effectiveness of these leaders. This investigation also analyzed the strategies utilized by the Black male ADs with respect to actual and perceived occupational mobility barriers that impact career development and advancement (Champagne, 2014).

The current line of inquiry was designed around the following questions:

1. Research Question 1: What are personal, professional, social, and institutional factors that impact the individual career trajectories of Black male ADs?
2. Research Question 2: How do Black male ADs remove any actual or perceived barriers to their career development?

Method

A phenomenological study design is a type of qualitative research that focuses on individuals' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect information regarding the Black athletic directors' perspectives and perceptions. Using a phenomenological approach, which is a qualitative technique focused on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they do so (Patton, 2014), this study gleaned a description of how the Black male participants were able to overcome barriers and advance into their respective athletic director positions. Phenomenology has been used in many sport-related studies (e.g., Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Brown & Payne, 2009; Singer, 2005b; Swift, 2011; Wiggins & Miller, 2003). In particular, such an approach can be used in CRT research as it allows the researcher to examine

the issue from the perspective of the participants' own experiences rather than the experience of the majority (Singer; Swift). The goal of phenomenology is to arrive at a description of the nature of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2015). A phenomenology study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. According to Creswell, interviews are conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation, and/or experience.

The current study focused on a phenomenon that has historically received little scholarly attention, which was the career socialization, development, and advancement of Black men in intercollegiate athletics administration at the FBS level. The basic interpretative qualitative research approach in the current study allowed for a collection of thick (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), rich descriptions in order to better understand the meaning of a particular phenomenon for those involved.

Participants

At the time this study was conducted (2021-2022), there were 12 Black male ADs affiliated with NCAA D-I FBS universities. The NCAA research database was used to determine the athletic directors that fit the study's inclusion criteria: an athletic director who is Black, male, and oversees an NCAA D-I FBS athletic department. A questionnaire was used to determine the accuracy of the NCAA diversity report. Other resources were used (e.g., The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport "Diversity Report Card") to determine the accuracy and completion in selecting the study's 12 participants. While three additional Black male ADs have been hired since the conclusion of the current study, for this current investigation, all ($N=12$) of the Black male ADs employed in the FBS participated in this study. This study's criteria required the participants to self-identify as male, as Black, and as a leader of FBS programs, which are high-profile sport entities with unique and significant pressures, complexities, and challenges for their ADs. Interviewing all 12 of the FBS' Black male ADs and capturing their stories provided a rich data source to analyze.

Interviews

In order to better understand the perceptions of Black ADs related to the substantive skill sets and necessary experiences to be an effective athletic director, a questionnaire was developed. Interview questions incorporated content related to the following core daily administrative tasks: fundraising, sport oversight, development, strategic planning, crisis communication, handling human resource issues, communication training, contract negotiations, capital projects, business operations, compliance, marketing, media relations, sponsor procurement, sports performance, event management, academic services, facilities management, and life skills programming (Wood et al., 2019). The current study also incorporated questions based on a variety of studies (Champagne, 2014; Rivers, 2015; Wong et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2019). In particular, the interview questions were designed to identify and analyze the elements available from the scholarship of Rivers and Champagne. Three scholars from Division I institutions reviewed and edited the proposed interview questions and the basic demographic information questionnaire before the materials were finalized for the current research study. All interviews took place virtually using a password protected video conferencing service. A digital recording device was utilized to record each interview. Raw data and summaries were made available to the participants.

Similar to the work of Rivers (2015), themes and other relevant information were provided to the 12 participants at the conclusion of the study for validity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in the current study utilized a constant comparative method to examine data for recurring patterns and themes. The constant comparative method involves taking one piece of data (e.g., interview, statement, theme) and comparing it with all others that may be similar or different in order to develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between the various pieces of data (Thorne, 2000). In order to obtain trustworthiness and rigor, the current study adhered to the guidelines recommended by Lincoln and Guba (2000). Lincoln and Guba also recommend various techniques (e.g., prolonged engagement, thick description, triangulation) be utilized to conduct qualitative research. In the current study, prolonged engagement was established with previous conversations and engagement with the subjects. All the subjects had previously spent time with the researcher, either socially or professionally. Thick descriptions were established with the data gathered through the in-depth interviews and the use of follow-up questions. Triangulation and peer debriefing occurred in the study by having the data reviewed by an expert panel consisting of only panelists who had a doctorate and were Black male scholars from Division I FBS institutions. To provide additional qualitative rigor to this study, the researcher provided a systematic approach to the analysis called the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2012).

Results

As noted previously, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship among self-identified Black male NCAA Division I FBS athletic directors and their lived experiences of career attainment through the lens of Critical Race Theory. CRT helps to explain why some Black ADs have been promoted, while other minorities similarly credentialed are not offered the position. Research has shown how minorities are promoted at a slow rate (Ray, 2022). Using the two research questions to guide this investigation, three aggregate dimensions were revealed in this study: allyship, nepotism, and networking with other minority leaders. These three overarching dimensions – which relate to the *Factors Impacting Career* (i.e., allyship and nepotism) and *Strategies to Overcome Barriers* (i.e., networking with other minority leaders) research questions – were established by seven second-order emergent themes.

First, there were four emergent themes related to the dimensions of *allyship* and *nepotism*. These four themes – which emerged as the participants described the personal, professional, social, and institutional factors that impacted their individual career trajectories – were *diverse networks*, *cultural differences*, *lack of privilege*, and *mentorship*. Next, there were three second-order themes related to the aggregate dimension of *networking with other minority leaders*. These three second-order themes – which surfaced as the participants talked about the strategies they undertook to remove any actual or perceived barriers to their career development – were *intrinsic motivation*, *gathering extensive experience*, and *being intentional about networking*.

Career Trajectory Aggregate Dimensions

This section presents the three aggregate dimensions that were revealed in this study from the participants' revelations of their lived experiences: *allyship*, *nepotism*, and *networking with other minority leaders*. All three dimensions were factors that impacted the participants' careers and their strategies for overcoming barriers. While it is not possible to include all of the individual responses proffered by the participants, representative quotes (e.g., Participant 1) are provided.

Allyship

The mentor-mentee relationship described in the data relates to the concept of allyship, e.g., alliances. While there is much crossover between the roles of mentors and allies, these individuals do not need to be the same person. One participant, however, described allyship behavior from the person who was also his mentor:

I was fortunate because [he] took me to all the athletic director meetings with him at the [conference]. So, I want you to imagine... a 28-year-old guy sitting in the room with... all these old school guys who were historic at their institutions, that people look up to. And they were all up there in age; then you got me, this 28-year-old kid sitting there. (Participant 10).

In this case, the ally appointed Participant 10 to a position that had previously been held by someone who was not a person of color. In doing so, the ally not only opened the door for Participant 10 to gain experience as a deputy AD, he also provided job exposure by attending all meetings with him.

The participants revealed that some alliances were made through networking events. For instance, because ADs must engage donors in their workplace roles, individual barriers are present when Black men are not invited to networking events. One participant commented on the necessity of allies to be included in the informal networking events that can make or break a donor deal:

I've experienced where I wasn't allowed, or wasn't invited, to the table. I wasn't invited to the dance. I wasn't invited to the party – multiple times – we go through that all the time. The way you basically get past that, is through allies, okay. There's, always some individual out there. You have to find that person who is respected in that community, but has an appreciation– they're more enlightened, in the way they view race and that enlightened individual, that ally, will open the doors for you, and allow you to ascend. But your job is to find that ally, and your job is also to never let that ally down. (Participant 4)

Participant 4 credits allyship for his pathway to success as an AD. In this case, the ally did not play the role of mentor but instead provided the conditions for this AD to engage the community of people who would support his institution.

Nepotism

With the number of Black ADs remaining small over the decades, the results of this study reveal that one of the reasons for this stagnation is nepotistic gatekeeping. The exclusionary practices affiliated with nepotism revealed in this study are affiliated with the lack of privilege in

a variety of settings, from hiring practices to institutional culture to unequal access to opportunity structures. The respondents felt that nepotism was a significant concern as it perpetuated “the good ol’ boys’ network.” For instance, one participant noted a juxtaposition of nepotism and tokenism. “I think nepotism is certainly much more prevalent than tokenism. Because you look around and you see a lot of it,” stated Participant 7. “I see a lot of familiar last names when you’re not a person of color emerging in athletic director jobs ... I think tokenism is overplayed as an excuse. I think nepotism is a reality of it.” Hiring practices that favor White men because of who they know rather than their qualifications is a form of privilege. Such hegemonic practices result in an overrepresentation of White leaders. This hegemonic structure normalizes exclusionary hiring and often excludes candidates who can adequately negotiate multi-million-dollar media and coaching contracts, navigate peer and leadership relationships, and situate their athletic programs within their respective institutions of higher education.

Networking with Other Minority Leaders

The social aspect of networking, specifically with other racial and ethnic minorities, was revealed in this study. Many of the Black male ADs spoke about the significance of networking opportunities that allowed them to connect with non-White leaders. Take, for instance, the McLendon Foundation. This organization started as a scholarship committee that provided post-graduate grants for minority students interested in a career in intercollegiate athletics. The founder was former executive director Mike Cleary, who was friends with John McLendon. The scholarship committee members were FBS Black ADs only. Through their engagement with this committee, Black ADs also got the chance to know one another. In recent years, the McLendon Foundation launched the Minority Leadership Initiative (MLI). This initiative was founded to provide minorities with opportunities to build their networks, as noted by one participant:

The McLendon pipeline has been helpful for, for minority administrators. I think having program or platform to connect, and, and see people and hear people, and develop relationships with people that look like you that have gone through similar experiences that you’re going to encounter, or you’ve gone through. I think there’s power in that, it is something that is special, and it has been very helpful. (Participant 3).

In support of this participant’s theory, another AD echoed the usefulness of the McLendon Foundation. “I would say the McLendon pipeline is something that is special and is very helpful,” noted Participant 2. “I know it’s been helpful to me, and I’d imagine it’s been helpful to a lot of other athletic directors.” The efficacy of the program for minority administrators was reiterated by another AD, who noted that just having “a program or platform to connect” and be able to “see people and hear people, and develop relationships with people that look like you that have gone through similar experiences that you’re going to encounter, or you’ve gone through. I think there’s power in that” (Participant 7). Thus, participants commented on how relevant MLI was, not only to their career advancement but also for the benefit of other minorities.

A second professional association that was mentioned by several participants was the Minority Opportunities Athletic Association (MOAA). This nonprofit organization provides opportunities for minorities in athletics to exchange ideas and address the lack of diversity in sport administration. “Obviously, MOAA has been a significant part of my life,” noted Participant 5,

adding that, “Some of my best friends in my, of my career, were solidified and sought after within MOAA and NACDA.” In addition to simple networking and exchanging ideas, what stood out for this participant was the ability to voice important issues for minority college athletes. Another participant commented on the usefulness of joining MOAA beyond the exchange of ideas, emphasizing “the relationships that either one establishes or one continues to build upon there...so, you know being a part of various professional development organizations, that has been key” (Participant 2). In addition to the national associations, one participant noted how his involvement in an NCAA fellowship program led to his involvement in various senior management level administrative experiences in intercollegiate athletics: “I did some things through NCAA programs, fellowship program, the NCAA Fellowship program helped me along the way” (Participant 4). Because the purpose of this program is to identify minorities and women who aspire to hold positions such as athletic director and conference commissioner, it is clear that direct involvement in this fellowship was one component that helped Participant 4 obtain the AD position.

In addition to the established networking organizations through the National Association Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA, an organization that focuses on professional development and networking for athletic directors), one participant mentioned a recently formed association. Created in July 2020, the Black AD Alliance was formed in response to the racial injustice and social outcry in the U.S. for Division I Black ADs to find ways to support one another. Furthermore, as noted by Participant 10, such alliance activities help “to bring more awareness out there, and to identify candidates – potential people.” (Participant 10). The creation of this network provides a platform for advocacy outside of NACDA for Black athletic administrators who seek to advance their careers. For this participant, it seemed necessary to be a trailblazer in addressing the lack of positions filled by minorities by joining a network that partners with NACDA rather than being a subsidiary.

Factors Impacting Career

The first research question that guided this study was focused on identifying factors that impacted career advancement. The following sections provide examples of the four emergent themes in this area: *diverse network*, *lack of privilege*, *mentorship*, and *cultural differences*.

Diverse Network

The participants identified having a diverse network as one of the key factors that impact one’s career. They discussed the importance of having heterogenous groups that have familiarity with the participants and will support them in varying capacities on a regular basis. Several of the participants mentioned that college sports are about relationships, and it is vital that many of these relationships are positive. Participants spent long hours during weeknights and weekends developing and cultivating these relationships. As Participant 1 noted, “I spent a lot of time in and around campuses: around coaches, around orientations, speaking at law school and business schools, and career development sessions on campus.” Several participants said that developing and sustaining these relationships can sometimes feel like a job of its own. While all ADs must develop and cultivate relationships, Black ADs must pay particular attention to ensure these relationships are present in order to do the job well. Participants also mentioned that the difference

was not about big issues but small issues that impact how the participant is perceived. “Most of the time, it is the small cultural differences that matter when you are on campus and trying to build relationships,” stated Participant 2, adding, “Sometimes it feels they put roadblocks in front of you.” This participant mentioned while he thought the cultural differences were not a big deal, he seems to acknowledge that he believes it does create challenges for him to overcome.

Other participants discussed the challenges of being a Black AD amid cultural differences. “We have to have everything that our White colleagues have and more,” noted Participant 5. Another interviewee (Participant 9) added that “Black administrators can ill-afford to be viewed as someone who is different. Once Black athletic directors are labeled/branded negatively, it is nearly impossible for them to ‘shake’ the negativity.” These participants discussed the pressure to assimilate to the majority culture and the need to be perfect.

Lack of Privilege

Findings from this study shed light on the fact that the participants were held to a higher standard than their White counterparts at the institutional level. This manifested as not having access to certain privileges that White ADs enjoy. Sometimes, the benefits were as simple as having basic allowances revoked:

I’ll give you just an, an example. When I got to this school, I was told, ‘You get a gas allowance,’ and I said, well I asked the business manager, because I didn’t have that at [previous school], and I said, ‘Well how does that work?’ ‘Just use your [school] card...’ And after about, a month on the job, I get a call from the president’s office, being told that, that was inappropriate... but I knew that the person before me had that privilege... I always tell people, what I think we as Black administrators want, is we want the same job as the guy or girl who had it before we got it...I told my business manager one time...I’m going to be the athletic director that’s held more accountable than any other athletic director that you’ve ever worked for. (Participant 9)

A simple and basic gas allowance was afforded to the previous (White) AD, which was a perk of the job. Whether it was not an actual policy or a miscommunication from the business manager, the money that went back into the pocket of the Black AD was enough of a disruption to warrant attention from the president’s office.

While the previous example spoke to a professional benefit that was provided to the predecessor of Participant 9, differential treatment can also refer to hiring practices. Often, White men are afforded second and third opportunities to hold the same job after performing poorly, while Black men are not afforded that same courtesy:

There are people I see that continue to get opportunity after opportunity in this business and they’re not good at what they do. Plain and simple. And everybody thinks they’re good at what they do, and they’re terrible. And I see some brothers out there that are very good at what they do, and it takes them forever to get an athletic director job. They got to interview for 10 different jobs before they get one. (Participant 10)

The perception is that White men are privileged with more room for error and mediocre job performance while Black men are not. They even have the advantage of having their “poor” workplace performance accepted by their peers, as evidenced by the comment, “Everybody thinks they’re good at what they do.” When this behavior is rewarded with job stability, fewer AD positions are available for capable candidates of color. And even when positions open up, some Black male ADs perceive that they are not interviewed for their authentic qualifications. For instance, Participant 2 talked about how challenging it is because “I think sometimes I’ve been the token interview of color, that I think a lot of us have gone through that.” In this scenario, the challenge is that ADs of color are not considered for their job performance and qualifications, but rather as a symbolic effort to give the appearance of racial equality within the workforce.

Other ADs mentioned being held to a different standard and the challenges they faced. The lack of privilege for Black ADs was also illustrated in the expectations once the hiring process ended and the job was acquired: “Unrealistic expectations in an unrealistic time frame. Just the expectation that you should do more in a quicker time frame if you want to sustain your position. So that’s a lot of pressure, so it’s real” (Participant 7). The expectation for Black ADs is perceived as unrealistic to maintain the same responsibilities, even though they are afforded less time to perform. Furthermore, as was the case with Participant 9, they are given fewer perks to handle the amplified job pressures.

Mentorship

All the participants made note of important career mentors in their eventual rise to leadership positions. Most spoke of people who offered them their first jobs. One participant shared about his mentor in athletics:

He kind of introduced me to the business, took me under his wing, and exposed me to the other side of intercollegiate athletics even when I was just in school, and you know, and competing myself. But he allowed me the time and energy to explain what happened behind the scenes and piqued my interest, uh, further piqued my interest into doing this. (Participant 8)

A major component of the mentor relationship seems to be the exposure to “behind the scenes” operations and important aspects of the job. Such early exposure allows potential candidates to absorb valuable knowledge relevant to their career advancement. “Not only has [my mentor] always vouched for me and served as a resource and a reference for me, he’s always given me great advice,” noted Participant 4. “He’s always allowed me to come to [university name] every other summer, spend half a day or a day with him, just soaking up, you know, everything that he does and how he does it.” The importance of receiving exposure to vital information and sharing that information when it is needed in the development stages helps to prepare aspiring athletic directors. The time and energy of closed-circuit hiring seemed to be redirected into preparing qualified candidates instead.

Formal mentorship programs are not always available in intercollegiate athletics. One candidate was outspoken about how he advocated for a mentor relationship as an intern:

When I got into the [conference name], as an intern, I used to always say, ‘Hey, Commissioner, if you’re going anywhere, I’ll be more than happy to drive you,’ and, ‘Can I go?’ And everybody’s like, ‘Why do you always want to go with the Commissioner?’ and I said, ‘Because I can bend his ear and learn.’ And he taught me a lot about the business. (Participant 3)

In contrast to recycled hiring practices that privilege White men, this formal, *proactive* mentor relationship employs the apprenticeship model that has a higher chance of producing quality candidates, regardless of same-race ties.

Other participants spoke of people who held positions outside of sport who mentored them. One interviewee noted his role in the larger context of athletic leadership models from the guidance he received from his mentor outside of athletics:

She basically shifted my focus from being an assistant football coach to doing a lot more in a sense of giving back to the ethnic/racial minority students in a way where, in her words, ‘I wasn’t a part of the problem. I was a part of the solution.’ So, at that point in time, she challenged me to get an advanced degree, as well as, to probably move into administration, where I can help young people transition to coaching, be a motivation, and help inform the leadership model. (Participant 6)

This mentoring relationship was important in stimulating a sense of generativity, or the willingness to engage in acts that promote the well-being of younger generations (McAdams & Logan, 2004). In this sense, the mentor encouraged this Black athletic director to be “part of the solution” for current ethnic and racial minorities, as well as future leaders.

Mentorship within athletics was crucial for career-savvy decisions. Participant 7 commented on how his mentor developed his career by steering him to join specific committees: “They helped facilitate me getting on committees – at NACDA, the NCAA – and really being involved ... I really owe a lot to them. They became confidential advisors.” Without developing the trust and guidance of an advisor, this participant may not have obtained the benefit of committee involvement and potential professional development opportunities.

Cultural Differences

The findings indicate that the participants experienced different obstacles due to racial identity and cultural differences than their White counterparts. These differences were particularly apparent in social settings that are critical to the position of AD. “Racism is surely one of the most pronounced obstacles Black men encounter at every level,” noted Participant 4, adding that “I have been told on several occasions that some institutions are ‘not ready’ for a Black head coach or AD.” Another AD (Participant 12) added that Black ADs are:

[S]een to have a chink in their armor. If it is not a skill set you haven’t achieved yet, it is difficult to get these skills in every area. This is why I spent the last five years trying to focus on external side of the house, because I wasn’t going to get a shot at this thing.

For the two instances above, each of the participants was provided messages that the community needed to be “ready” for a Black AD. In the example by Participant 12, he understood the challenges he needed to overcome and decided to spend as much time as possible understanding donors and boosters in the community. For instance, in another case, Participant 4 discussed social settings with decision makers, and he was told that the institution would not hire a minority candidate because the institution had not demonstrated cultural maturity to consider a Black male for AD. This AD also provided another example by discussing the need to be perfect and to make the majority culture “feel good” by “code switching”:

When we do coaches caravan tours when we go to you know the different cities to meet boosters. Yes, because we have to walk up the pressure to be perfect. I’ve got to be happy; I can’t be mediocre in these things. So, yes it causes a slight bit of anxiety, not because of the number of people but because of my level of code switching and the idea that I need to be perfect in front of a group, like that. To not given them any reason not to like me. (Participant 4)

For Black ADs, there appeared to be a level of expectation by the majority population that there is a level of assimilation necessary to be acceptable to the group as a whole. While there doesn’t appear to be an overt discussion about assimilation, there are cultural norms in higher education that make this an unspoken truth for Black ADs.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

The second research question that guided this study was focused on identifying strategies to remove and overcome barriers in the workplace. The three themes that emerged in this area were *intrinsic motivation*, *gathering extensive experience*, and *being intentional about networking*.

Intrinsic Motivation

One tactic that the Black ADs used to reduce any actual or perceived barriers to their career development was the non-cognitive factor of intrinsic motivation. Often, the participants shared narratives that reflected how they had to motivate themselves to get to where they were. Not only were there few men of color in the highest offices of leadership in college athletics, but in many cases, they were the first Black male at their institutions to be appointed to the AD role:

My goal was never to be the first African American athletic director, in the [conference]. My goal, to be candid with you, I wanted to be one of the youngest athletic directors in the country, because I wanted to show people that you don’t, you just because you’re older, doesn’t mean you’re more qualified. I know sometimes you have more experience, but that doesn’t mean you’re more qualified. (Participant 10)

The goal of this Black AD was to break the record and set a new standard for excellence in his field. His motivation stemmed from disrupting the status quo to prove his worth on behalf of his age demographic. His perception was that work history in athletic leadership equated to job competence. This internal drive to validate and “show people” his standards for job performance

appears to be the primary motivator that indirectly led to him becoming one of the youngest Black leaders in his field.

Another method of perseverance through challenges for Black athletic directors in a professional field dominated by Whites was to embrace non-cognitive personality traits. One participant shared the personality traits of grit and resilience as his source of motivation:

I think any decision you make, you realize you might please some but you're not going to please all, and you have to, uh, be able to have the grit and resilience to be able to move forward and do what you think is right, and try to do it to the best of your ability. (Participant 8)

In this case, a combination of passion, perseverance, and plasticity allowed him to recover quickly from difficulties. Although the origins of these traits for Participant 8 were unclear, Participant 5 shared the fountainhead of his leadership skills:

But the covert part – you knew who didn't want you in the room, and as we all know – anyone of color understands that comfort level, that you deal with. But my dad always taught me to rise above it, um, and that's what I always did. It was never something that I had to confront – I just had to know it was there, and it did matter. So, uh, that was a challenge for me, but uh, so really developing my leadership skills, and dealing with, uh, that particular issue, early in my career, uh, was sometimes challenging. (Participant 5)

For this Black AD, the relationship with his father became the root of his intrinsic motivation. Through the detailed description of his resilience development, it is clear that having a mentor early on shaped his intrinsic motivation. In line with job performance, Participant 5 was motivated to prove both to himself and to his colleagues that he was competent. Similar to the previous participants' endeavors to "show them," this Black AD was intrinsically motivated to "convince people" that he was capable in his leadership role. A strong foundation of self-belief rather than self-doubt was critical to this person's internal drive.

Gathering Extensive Experience

Another tactic that was attributed to the participants' success was the extensive experience they gathered prior to being brought on as ADs. One participant articulated the importance of understanding the larger context of the job:

I was on the [committee name] back in the day. You know, I was [on] all these different committees in the structure – that gave me a leg up on everybody, because a lot of the athletic directors did not understand the governance structure. I understood the rules, the regulations, and how everything worked. (Participant 10)

In essence, Participant 10 attributed his know-how in his current role to the extensive experience gathered throughout his career. His career success was precipitated by a purposeful comprehension of the systemic rules in athletic leadership. This perception led him to direct his effort into joining committees that could teach him the inner workings of the athletic director infrastructure.

Participant 10 directly linked his purposeful knowledge gathering as giving him an advantage over his colleagues, or “a leg up on everybody” in such a competitive work environment.

Another participant, when asked if he had experienced any adversity or if he had been treated differently than his White peers, retorted:

I didn't come up the traditional athletic director route, if you will, so when I came here, I came here as the [position title]. I came here with four years of experience with the [professional team name] before that and 14 years as a very successful [career] prior to that. So, I came in with, very frankly, a background that was probably a little more robust than most folks, who have come to the college ranks. So very frankly, I came in with a resume and a history, uh, that made, would have made it a lot harder for folks to, essentially, try and give me a hard time. (Participant 11)

In sum, Participant 11 credited his success to his extensive experience gathering. It was, in his eyes, the key to overcoming adversarial treatment because he had more experience than those who would have given him a hard time. The resume, job history, and education of this Black athletic director fortified his ability to persevere through challenges. It seems that the prior experience bolstered this participant for adversarial treatment both in the athletic context as well as in the cultural landscape of the city in which he lived.

Being Intentional about Networking

The final tactic to which the athletic directors credited their success was intentional networking. Some spoke of the importance of networking as the key to winning over stakeholders at their institutions. Several participants shared their involvement in professional organizations, e.g., NACDA, as “a part of my development factor” (Participant 5). It was clear from the participants' responses that they believed NACDA served as a gateway organization to other connecting networks for Black ADs. Another AD commented on how useful LEAD 1 (which is now the Division I Athletic Directors Association) was to his career. Participant 4 noted that he was “fortunate” to participate in this organization. He added that the organization “used to do some things where they would send administrators to LEAD 1, uh, that wanted to become athletic directors. That helped me.”

Outside of specific professional associations, several participants spoke of the importance of networking relationships in general. In the sports industry within higher education, relationships make the difference:

But, you know, in order to be successful in this business, you know, it starts with the relationships that, you know, first and foremost, you're going to have with your, with your, with your staff; your coaches, your student-athletes if you expand that to campus, expand that to, you know, your, your fan base; your donor base, your, your alum. And then also, you know, relationships that you're going to have in the industry, whether it's with, you know, other peers; whether it's the folks in the conference office; folks in the national office, search firms, you know, what have you. (Participant 11)

Such comments highlight the significance of interpersonal effectiveness in multiple layers of the intercollegiate athletic context. Participant 11 attributes his success to his relationships with his immediate colleagues first. Then, he branches out from stakeholders in the college environment to regional relationships, and finally to national networks. His direct relationships that ripple out into indirect networks reveal the multiple social ecologies nested within larger contexts. Another participant articulated the social aspect of a successful leader in athletics:

You've got to be a connector, I think, as an athletic director. Uh, you gotta [sic] get people connected, and be able to connect with different types of people, whether it's students, faculty, donors, ticket holders, people angry with you, people that don't agree with you – you gotta [sic] be able to connect with all of them, in some kind of way, and that's a big one. (Participant 8)

Such networking allowed this AD to negotiate with people in tense situations effectively. Regardless of the level of anger or intractability of colleagues, successful Black ADs must be able to connect with them in a meaningful way.

In one instance, intentional networking provided career advancement through indirect connections between stakeholders. For one Black AD, it was his recommendation from an existing network that allowed him to expand his job search:

I get a call from the president at [college]... and then it became apparent to me that he didn't really know a lot about me. He didn't know I had my doctorate, and I'm walking him through my resume, and I said, "Well, Mr. President, with all due respect, you've called me, but you don't seem to know a lot about me. Um, what is it that you know about me?" So he kinda chuckled and he said, "You know [participant name], I don't know a lot about you at all, but I called [name], and he told me that I should call you before I called anybody else." And so, that's what led to me getting involved in that search, and of course, well he didn't just hand me the job. I interviewed formally 2 or 3 weeks later, with 4 or 5 other finalists, and then I landed it, but I was not interested in [college]. It was off my radar, and I thought they had filled it, but they hadn't, so that's how I ended up gettin' [sic] that job. (Participant 9)

Joining a specific association or committee did not have an immediate effect on this AD getting that particular job. However, his pre-existing relationship with an influential stakeholder provided an alternative route to career advancement. It was this pre-existing relationship that allowed him to even consider developing his career at this particular college since it was not considered an option before the phone interview. In this case, intentional networking is illustrated as a powerful force, as the AD above (Participant 9) was purposefully recruited and prioritized by the college and came highly recommended. His relationship was enough to bypass the usual channels of screening applicants for job competence, as noted by the president's perceived negligence of the candidate's resume. Overall, it is clear from the sentiments of the participants that they perceived intentional networking as the key to their success.

Discussion

One of the most salient themes from the data analysis was that Black male ADs do not enjoy the same privileges as their White AD counterparts. Participants mentioned differences in how they were treated as AD when compared to their White predecessors. This was shared with the participants through anecdotal stories by eyewitness accounts, such as an employee who was employed under both the current and previous ADs or from the previous AD directly. When investigating the findings, the word *privilege* is important to underscore. McIntosh (1990) explained that privilege exists when one group has access to a value that is denied to others simply because of groups to which they belong. Lack of privilege can have a negative effect in terms of one's career trajectory. This is consistent with CRT, which holds that society is so ingrained in Whiteness that privilege is extended to those who belong to this group (Singer, 2005). For instance, in the current study, most of the participants indicated a need to perform better than their White counterparts in all facets of the job for fear of not getting another career opportunity in a comparable position. This same experience was discussed when it came to hiring. Many of the ADs felt that their White colleagues would receive multiple job offers in the future, while they were not confident that they would receive another opportunity in their career. As Participant 9 indicated, "...we need to be twice as good as our White counterparts or we will not get the same opportunities." As indicated in CRT, providing a counterstorytelling platform for racial and ethnic minorities to express their voice and how they see situations differently than their colleagues allows for a better understanding of a phenomenon and its specific impact on ADs.

Understanding an individual's lack of privilege provides practitioners with insight on how to ask tough questions on creating policies to combat seismic institutional racism. Several scholars have emphasized that the CRT tenet of interest convergence exposes this discrepancy in hiring practices by explaining that White elites will encourage the advancement of minorities as long as it promotes their self-interest (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Singer, 2005; Tate, 1997; Wing, 1997). Furthermore, the prevalence of nepotism only solidifies the permanence of racism, another tenet of CRT. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 9: "I feel that a *great* deal of nepotism is associated with the ascension of White athletic directors/coaches." When this type of thinking is normalized among White leaders, CRT's tenet of Whiteness as property is perpetuated through the possession of elite leadership positions. One participant spoke to this by sharing, "Unless you have a president who can withstand some of the racism, or inability to think broadly, that comes from the folks that influence his or her decisions, you're going to have the same result" (Participant 12). In essence, the same result (i.e., lack of minority group members being hired to AD positions) will continue because university presidents view AD positions as property to be protected.

Partnership with a mentor was exceedingly important to this group of ADs. Each AD discussed the importance of mentors and how they assisted in their respective success. The ADs talked about the support they received regarding how to comport themselves as young professionals in the business. Interviewees indicated that mentors identified people they should meet and what questions they should ask in order to understand previously unfamiliar components of collegiate sports. Several ADs talked about having minority faculty mentors, business mentors, and religious mentors who helped them grow both professionally and personally. These findings confirm previous research on academic and career advancement (Baker & Hawkins, 2016). In effect, the mentorship, diverse network, and allyship revealed in the interviews in the current study paved the way for counterstorytelling. Participant 10 detailed how the counterstorytelling, in turn, contributed to his career ascendancy: "As I started speaking up, they started embracing me, and I

listened, and I learned from that group.” This further established the allyship because Participant 10’s involvement in the meetings would certainly lay the groundwork for slow but ongoing change.

Allyship is a seemingly effective tool to dismantle the nepotism of “the good ol’ boys network. Several of the Black ADs interviewed spoke of the benevolence of the White male allies they had. Participant 4 talked about the onus of “find[ing] that person who is respected in that community, but has an appreciation– they’re more *enlightened*, in the way they view race and that enlightened individual, that ally, will open the doors for you, and *allow* you to ascend.” At a linguistic level, participants spoke of Whiteness as property, as if the White men in “the good ol’ boys network” had the right to possess elite leadership positions, the right to exclude candidates of color in hiring practices, etc. Thus, while allyship is helpful in dismantling the exclusivity of Whiteness as property, a CRT analysis reveals how deep-rooted racism is in cultural norms.

In order to eliminate any actual or perceived barriers to their career development, participants shared narratives of their intrinsic motivation. The ADs all seemed driven to have a successful career. All spoke of perseverance despite professional setbacks, e.g., not getting selected for a position, missing out on a major donor fund. They seemed to have an internal resolve and confidence to deal with failure. While intrinsic motivation and emotional intelligence are admirable and necessary, a CRT lens reveals that successful Black ADs must also possess an internal drive to demythologize the narrative of colorblindness in addition to their career motivation. Participant 5 spoke of his intuitive understanding of the invisible nature of systemic White privilege: “You knew who didn’t want you in the room, and as we all know – anyone of color understands that uncomfot level, that you deal with.” That discomfort he reflected on – and eventually mitigated – was the larger sociocultural dominant ideology that treats the White majority like the universal cultural standard. In CRT, the result of this treatment has the effect of positioning non-White people as deficient. The experiential knowledge of Participant 5 led him to comment on his individual as well as his broader cultural positioning: *anyone of color understands* the discomfort level that you deal with. The confidence that he evoked implies that the myth of colorblindness, implicit biases, and microaggressions pervade not only his individual career path but also the paths of other leaders of color.

The myth of colorblindness is further exposed in the challenges of removing real and perceived barriers to career advancement. Within the myth of colorblindness lies the rejection of the claim that American education has traditionally been a meritocratic system. The insights of Participant 5 illustrate the hope and trust in a meritocracy by “trying to convince people of that just takes time, energy, and faith that you can do the job and over time. Hopefully, you can try to win some people over.” There is faith and hope in an objective, race-neutral, equal opportunity performance on the job. Yet, through the documented experiences of nepotism, it seems that Black ADs were not privileged to an equal opportunity career trajectory. Perhaps it was time, energy, and faith that paved the way for this Black AD to develop his career. However, it seems more likely in a society that is, in fact, not race-neutral, his career advancement correlated with the networks with White leaders that he formed.

In order to remove any actual or perceived adversarial treatment in their career development, participants also shared narratives of how they gathered extensive experience prior to becoming ADs. Extensive experience may be one traditional advancement factor that allowed

Black ADs to progress in their career trajectories, but it was certainly not the only factor. For instance, one AD talked about this extensive experience as giving him “a leg up on everybody.” However, an analysis of this AD’s interview revealed that it was not his extensive experience in isolation but also his allyship with White leaders in power. His personal belief that his merit alone rather than the power of his connections in the “good ol’ boys club” advanced his career actually reinforces the myth of colorblindness. This is similar to another AD who explained his strategy for removing career advancement barriers by noting his extensive experience, resume, and history. At the same time, this AD noted that everything started with “relationships.” Such responses reveal that some Black men believe that merit alone rather than the power of their networking advances their career. When the nature of systemic White privilege remains invisible, a person’s beliefs reinforce the dominant ideology of colorblindness. Because the reality of racism is that it has indirect and invisible ways to influence marginalized people, a CRT lens calls into question whether or not the participant who commented on his extensive background could trace his career success to a White ally, as we saw in the example above.

Lastly, the ADs discussed the importance of forming relationships with people in the business on a personal level as essential to their success. The Black male ADs created relations in order to form credibility and trust. A majority of the participants cited NACDA as a significant factor in removing barriers to career advancement. This barrier removal strategy required athletic directors to rely on non-cognitive traits of interpersonal effectiveness skills. It is interesting to note the differentiation of racialized networking through a CRT lens. When speaking of the general athletic leadership associations (i.e., White hegemony), participants never articulated how People of Color explicitly benefited. Instead, they spoke of individualized career advancement strategies: student affairs theory (Participant 5), passion and commitment (Participant 1), relationships (Participant 11), etc. While the narrative from Participant 9 revealed how his indirect relationship with a college president would lead to his career advancement, he still spoke of the lack of authentic connection they shared during their informal phone interview.

In stark contrast, participants who spoke of networking with other minority leaders told a narrative of communal career advancement benefits. For instance, the ADs interviewed in this study shared how the McLendon Foundation was helpful to them because it created a platform to see and hear other people “that look like you” (Participant 3). It was especially powerful to develop relationships with other minority leaders who have removed barriers to their career advancement on an individual level as well as a cultural level. Participants expressed confidence that minority-driven leadership associations benefitted other leaders of color. The CRT tenet of the permanence of racism suggests that Blacks and other minorities had to form their own groups nested within NACDA for a platform of advocacy because racism is a steadfast and permanent part of the everyday lived experiences of People of Color. In the case of the Black AD Alliance, People of Color created a coalition that partners with NACDA but with its own strategic priorities to promote the advancement of minority athletic administrators. They also collaborate with MOAA and other minority-focused advocacy organizations “to combat social and racial inequalities” (LaSalle University, 2020, para. 4). Because CRT acknowledges that racism will not dissolve in the near future, communing with other minority leaders reveals the necessity of coping with existing power structures that privilege White people by forming advocacy groups explicitly for People of Color. The persistence of racial discrimination is so permanent that non-White social units have to form subgroups in order to address their cultural and communal barriers to career advancement.

Implications and Conclusions

While there has been limited research focused on the Black male AD's voice, the documentation of their experience is necessary in order to provide a complete perspective of the AD position. In order to fill in the gaps in this knowledge base, the first research question (RQ1) examined the personal, professional, social, and institutional factors that impacted the individual career trajectories of current Black athletic directors. This research question focused on the "Factors Impacting Career." Through the data analysis process, the factors that were identified were grouped into the themes of *diverse network*, *lack of privilege*, *mentorship*, and *cultural differences*. Allyship and nepotism were the aggregate dimensions that supported these themes. Secondly, the current research inquiry (RQ2) was designed to learn how the participants reduced any actual or perceived barriers to their career development. This research question focused on the "Strategies to Overcome Barriers." Through the data analysis process, the strategies that were identified were grouped into the themes of *intrinsic motivation*, *gathering extensive experience*, and *being intentional about networking*. These strategy themes supported the aggregate dimension of networking with other minority leaders.

Sport in the United States is constantly changing as revenues increase and the proliferation of multimedia enhances the voice of the athlete in professional and college sports alike. As the number of Black athletes increases in college football and basketball, so does their influence over how messages are provided to the public audience. Student-athletes and students (not just Black students) are asking questions about CRT in light of media hysteria and current sports scandals. Questions about CRT lead to understanding the cultural norms about sports and the lack of privileges provided to Blacks, particularly when it comes to navigating power and influence. Creating equity in hiring decisions and advancement opportunities for those interested in a career in sports provides better decisions that are absent of racial bias. The use of CRT in examining Black ADs allows for an important perspective on how they can seek career breakthroughs and overcome challenges so that researchers can provide practical solutions to promote greater social equality. The CRT analysis in the current study deconstructed what is not working around racial equity by illustrating the lack of privilege and the role of nepotism in intercollegiate athletic leadership. Holding Black athletic directors to a higher standard than their White counterparts and hiring practices that employ differential treatment, tokenism, and favoritism all promote racial inequity.

This study is significant because it is important to understand how more minority males can increase their chances of becoming athletic directors. The data shared in the study can help athletic programs design a roadmap toward development. One of the limitations of the study is its singular focus on Black male athletic directors. While, as noted earlier in this work, Black male ADs face particular challenges in their work within a White/male hegemonic culture, Black female ADs face their own unique challenges, as the intersectionality of race and gender brings on particular challenges with discrimination, racism, sexism, etc. Thus, there is a need for future phenomenological work in this line of inquiry to include an examination of the lived experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of Black female ADs leading NCAA D-I FBS athletic departments.

In order to reconstruct and support effective career advancement strategies, several practical solutions can be drawn from the data analysis themes of mentorship and networking.

Because all of the participants articulated how their mentors led to their eventual career advancement, it would behoove individual NCAA institutions to embed mentorship programs for sports administrators of color within comprehensive diversity and racial equity plans. Ally programs might contain some crossover, as many of the participants noted how their allies brought them to meetings. Also, it would be ideal if existing Black leaders could exchange dialogue about mentorship and allyship ideas during a formal gathering. In this manner, they could “insert their voice, reflect on their experiential knowledge through an engaging dialogue about the reality of race and racism” (Bimper, 2017, p. 189). Fortuitously, as of 2020, such a group exists. The Black AD Alliance could feasibly become the fountainhead of informal or formalized mentorship programs.

The role of college athletics in society remains a viable option for disadvantaged groups to obtain a college degree. While college sports continue to provide entertainment for millions of people each year, the most important aspect for a student-athlete is gaining a college diploma. As the number of Black men continues to increase in the revenue sports of football and basketball, so does the importance of having role models in leadership positions that student-athletes can learn from as potential athletic directors or presidents. The men in this study have demonstrated that role models don't need to be People of Color to inspire Black men to obtain terminal degrees or work in the highest leadership position possible. However, they have shown how having people who share these lived experiences positively impacts all student-athletes. Regardless of perceived barriers, the results of this study revealed that the Black male athletic directors overseeing D-I FBS programs demonstrated grit, resilience, and motivation to leadership positions while remembering to open gates for equity among all disenfranchised communities.

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