Expectations, Opportunities, and Obstructions to Advancement for Women in Sport Leadership: Perceptions of Undergraduate Students

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A host of researchers have investigated the barriers that women frequently face as they strive for senior leadership hierarchical levels in sport organizations (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, Grappendorf & Henderson, 2011; Forsyth, Jones, Duval, & Bambridge, 2019; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Despite clear research findings that confirm that the obstacles are real, and government and organizational policies designed to reduce or eliminate them, little progress has been made (Burton, 2019). This descriptive study was designed to explore and describe perceptions that men and women undergraduate students have about the barriers women may face in advancing their careers to senior leadership levels within the sports industry. The researchers used the valid and reliable Career Pathways Survey (CPS) instrument (Smith, Crittenden, & Caputi, 2012) to uncover the perceptions of undergraduate students studying sport management at nine Canadian universities offering a sport management program. The survey gauged the respondents’ (n = 93) perceptions of the barriers that women often face to advance to senior leadership positions in the industry. Prior to data collection, the students were provided with a context slide highlighting (in visual and prose formats) the ratio of men and women currently occupying President and Vice-President positions in professional sport in Canada. The data were analyzed across four themes, namely: resilience, denial, acceptance, and resignation, and by using the glass ceiling perspective. A Chi-square analysis computation confirmed that men and women students held similar aspirations for senior leadership roles. However, students felt differently about the presence of barriers that women would face in reaching these hierarchical levels (indicated via a MANOVA). The women students felt that a glass ceiling existed for women as they progress in the field. As well, they felt more strongly that women do not just accept management positions. The two groups agreed that women are often overlooked for promotions due to social and organizational barriers and that women are resilient in their pursuit for senior leadership. Similar to Hancock et al. (2018), our findings support the leadership labyrinth approach to understanding and rectifying this inequity. Undergraduate students studying sport management are equally preparing for senior leadership roles in the sport industry. However, there are clear gender differences in the perceptions of the barriers women may face to advance in their careers. This could be one of the explanations as to why progress is moving at such a glacial pace. Furthermore, the results of this research highlight the need for sport management educators to more impactfully educate students on the value and need to ensure that the concepts and legal aspects of equity, diversity, and inclusion are covered in higher education programs.