Barriers to Senior Leadership Positions for Women in Sport Management: Perceptions of Undergraduate Students and Insights from their Professors

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In professional sport in Canada, there are 98 president and vice-president positions available. 84 of these positions are occupied by men and 14 by women. This is a staggering statistic and the reason for this needs to be investigated further. Existing literature has interviewed these women and participants have stated that they have faced barriers in order to gain these senior level leadership positions. A significant number of women are graduating from undergraduate sport related programs (e.g., Kinesiology, Recreation and Leisure, Sport Management) in Canadian schools. A similar translation to senior leadership in sport is not seen and the reason for this is unknown. This project investigates the perceptions undergraduate students have of the barriers women may face in order to advance in the sport industry. The undergraduate students participating in this study are senior sport management students enrolled in one of the sport management programs offered in the four Southern Ontario universities. The students were oriented to the study by viewing a PowerPoint slide highlighting the men and women currently occupying the President and Vice-President positions in the industry. Data was collected using the Career Pathways Survey, and portioned into four categories: resilience, denial, acceptance, and resignation. The Career Pathways Survey (CPS) measures barrier perception as it relates to the glass ceiling phenomenon. The glass ceiling is a barrier that research says women face when advancing in their careers. At a certain timepoint in their career advancement they are no longer presented with, offered, or considered for various things in the workplace such as promotions, positions, and projects. Reasons for this can be because of various barriers such as sexual harassment, discrimination, stereotypes etc. The CPS consists of various statements that relate to these barriers to gain the participants perceptions of women who may face these barriers in order to advance in the sport industry. Once data are collected and analyzed, a focus group was held with the students’ sport management professors to gain their reactions to the results, determine their perceptions of the shortage, and give their thoughts on addressing the emerging issues. The results of this study will help to better understand where undergraduate students’ perceptions lie when thinking about barriers for women in the workplace, and how these perceptions may or may not affect their will and desire to achieve senior leadership in their future careers. As well as, the results will assist students in planning and navigating their careers in the sport industry. Finally, they will also help professors better prepare students for success and advancement in their careers, to face, overcome, and become allies with other students and colleagues when facing barriers in the workplace.