High School Athletic Directors: Secondary Education Leaders' Perceptions

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Abstract

The roles of secondary athletics and activities directors (SAADs) continue to evolve in a rapidly changing landscape of high school athletics. This quantitative study aimed to examine foundational research intersections between sport management and educational leadership by exploring the perceptions of secondary educational leaders of the roles, duties, impact, and career preparation of SAADs. The study's results suggest that secondary educational leaders perceive the role of a SAAD as needing a wide range of skills, including leadership, crisis management skills, and interpersonal communication skills to better manage the internal and external relationships associated with the role. The findings express the recommendation of secondary educational leaders to explore additional training opportunities and educational credentials targeted at better preparing SAADs for the expanding responsibilities their role demands. The results also emphasize that SAADs play a significant role in both the educational and athletic development of students and call for greater collaboration between the academic disciplines of sport management and educational leadership to better meet the dynamic needs of the roles and responsibilities of future SAADs. The authors also suggest the collection of more data to better understand how SAADs are perceived by their colleagues, students, and parents.

1. Introduction

More than 7.8 million U.S. high school boys and girls participated in interscholastic athletics during the 2022-23 school year (NFHS, 2023). Those participants are led by thousands of high school athletic directors (HSADs), who are responsible for influencing the culture and experiences of high school coaches and participating interscholastic student-athletes (HSSAs) across the country (Hums et al., 2023; Lopiano & Zotos, 2022; Kochanek & Erickson, 2021). Secondary athletics and activities directors

(SAADs) have recently faced increased demands in their job role(s) (Elam, 2022; Gaddis, 2013; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004), difficulty in recruiting and retaining high-quality coaches (Sulz et al., 2021), and must interact daily with a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders (Sturges et al., 2020). While the popularity of interscholastic athletics continues to soar, industry and sport management academic discipline research has not grown at similar rates (Seifried, 2022). Experiential learning is key to a number of disciplines and preparation-focused programs within higher education, including sport management (Foster & Dollar, 2017; Foster & Pierce, 2021; Sauder & Murdick, 2018), educational or school psychology, counseling education (Arthur & Archenbach, 2002; King et al., 2022; *U.S. Official News*, 2018), nursing education (Kimzey et al., 2016), teacher preparation (Slavick & Zimbardo, 2012; Svinivki & McKeachie, 2011), business education (Holmes & Sullivan, 2018), and educational leadership (Hightower & Waters, 2018). Interscholastic athletics continues to be a useful site for preparing future sport management students, due to the abundance of experiential learning opportunities available and the environment's connection with educational and professional preparation (Hums et al., 2023). As a result, there is an increasing need to better understand and collaborate with interscholastic sport or athletic programs/departments. Relatedly, as sport management researchers engage with educational leadership scholars, there are several overlapping research areas where collaboration can benefit not only the sport management and educational leadership research literatures but also students and practitioners in both arenas.

To that end, the purpose of this research is to further examine foundational research intersections between sport management and educational leadership areas. In particular, what are secondary educational leaders' perceptions of high school athletic directors' roles, duties, and functions?

Literature Review

Secondary athletics and activities directors (SAADs) are crucial in developing and managing middle and high school sports programs (Sturges et al., 2020). These professionals organize, administer, and oversee athletic activities, ensuring they align with regulatory mandates, educational goals, and community expectations (Kochanek & Erickson, 2021). This literature review examines various aspects of the roles, functions, and expectations of secondary athletics and activities directors and scholarship intersecting interscholastic sports and the sport management discipline.

Functions and Roles of Secondary Athletics and Activities Directors

The primary functions and roles of a SAAD include planning, organizing, and managing school sports programs. These roles have expanded significantly in recent years to accommodate interscholastic the increased complexity of athletics and demands.

SAADs are responsible for the athletics program's overall administration, including scheduling games, managing budgets, and ensuring compliance with regulations and policies. According to Fowler et al. (2017), SAADs must possess strong management skills and a comprehensive understanding of sport legal and ethical issues. In addition, recent studies emphasized the need for SAADs to be adept in crisis management and to have the ability to make quick decisions under pressure, particularly in situations involving student-athlete safety and health (Sullivan et al., 2014). Interscholastic scholarship has also reflected the growing complexity of managing school sports programs in today's educational landscape. For example, increasing awareness and management of concussion-related injuries has become a significant part of the SAAD's role (Bomgardner, 2019; Casa et al., 2013).

The academic and personal development of student-athletes is another critical role of SAADs, including ensuring academic eligibility, promoting student-athlete well-being, and providing guidance and support. Kochanek and Erickson (2021) delved into the critical praxis of SAADs, examining how they navigated social issues within their schools and underscored the SAADs' role in promoting not only athletic success but also social and emotional wellness among students, thus positioning SAADs as crucial figures in the holistic development of student-athletes. The dual role of some SAADs, who also serve as assistant principals, adds even more to the already numerous responsibilities in supporting student-athlete development (Elam, 2022). Moreover, research by Lee et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence (e.g., being aware of one's emotions and managing emotions in others) and soft skills in managing student-athlete relationships and effectively addressing their mental health needs. Faunce (2020) explored gender disparities among SAADs, emphasizing the multifaceted roles these administrators play, including a pivotal role in fostering inclusive and equitable environments for all student-athletes. Research also indicates that participation in interscholastic sports positively impacts student achievement and well-being. SAADs play a pivotal role in creating programs that support academic success and personal development, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to education (Elam, 2022). Lee et al. (2020) contributed that athletic directors who actively promote academic achievement and provide structured support systems for student-athletes contribute significantly to their overall success.

Effective communication and collaboration with parents, coaches, and community members are essential for building a supportive environment for student-athletes. SAADs must promote positive relationships and engage stakeholders to enhance the athletic program's success (Whisenant et al., 2007). Recent findings suggest that social media and other digital platforms have become increasingly important for maintaining these relationships and ensuring transparent communication (Forsyth et al., 2020; Zdroik & Veliz, 2020). Johnson et al. (2013) also found that educating parents on the goals of interscholastic athletics topped a list of essential issues for SAADs in building a collaborative and supportive environment with parents of student-athletes.

Expectations of Secondary Athletics and Activities Directors

The expectations placed on secondary athletics and activities directors are high and multifaceted. They must balance administrative duties with the needs of students, coaches, and the broader school community. Zayas (2018) found that SAADs are expected to contribute to the academic and personal development of student-athletes and integrate interscholastic athletics programs within the broader educational mission of the schools. Rudzinski (2022) found expectations from internal and external stakeholders for SAADs to implement initiatives and programs supporting the mental and emotional well-being of student-athletes as part of the ever-growing importance of mental health in educational settings.

Principals and hiring committees often prefer candidates with a background in education, coaching experience, and specific coursework in sport management, law, and finance (Fowler et al., 2017). This diverse skill set enables SAADs to handle the various challenges they face in the administration of interscholastic athletics. Additionally, ongoing professional development and certifications, such as those offered by the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA), are increasingly vital for maintaining high standards of competence and professionalism in an era of unprecedented change (Blackburn et al., 2013).

SAADs are also expected to exhibit strong leadership qualities and make informed decisions that benefit the athletic program and its participants. These skills include policy development, conflict

resolution, and promoting a positive athletics culture in a broader, thriving school environment. Leading and inspiring staff and students is critical to their success (Young, 2010). Recent research by Schneider (2021) underscored the importance of ethical leadership and integrity in the role of athletic directors, particularly in maintaining fair play and sportsmanship.

The expectations are even higher for those serving as SAAD and assistant principals. They must effectively manage the demands of both roles without compromising performance in either role. This dual responsibility often requires exceptional time management and organizational skills (Elam, 2022). Studies have shown that those prioritizing their SAAD role tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction and morale than those who view themselves primarily as assistant principals (Sullivan et al., 2014).

Interscholastic Sports and Sport Management

Interscholastic sports have become an integral part of the educational experience, providing students with opportunities for physical development, teamwork, and personal growth. The management of these programs requires specialized knowledge and skills. While the popularity of interscholastic athletics continues to grow, research connecting SAADs to the sport management discipline has yet to develop as quickly. Forsyth et al. (2020) found that only a handful of journal articles related to research on interscholastic athletics appeared in sport management-specific peer-reviewed journals. Seifried (2022) produced a recent call to sport management scholars to focus research on preparing future sport managers. This article attempts to answer that call, focusing on the development of future SAADs using the perceptions of those who supervise them.

Research Questions

SAADs appear to have wide-ranging impacts on a number of stakeholder groups beyond sports coaches and secondary student-athletes within the secondary educational environment. Impacts and expectations include not only a commitment to education, student support, and other school or district-based colleagues (Rudzinski, 2022) but also developing student-athletes, supporting professionalized and impactful coaching (Zayas, 2018), supporting local communities, and even demonstrating a commitment to character development within sport programs (Vest Ettekal et al., 2018). To successfully execute this complex position with multiple roles aligned to distinct social and educational expectations, SAADs must be well-versed in management best practices, such as performance evaluations, motivating employees, and providing meaningful professional feedback for personal growth (Ratts & Pedersen, 2023). Based upon the previous literature, the purpose of this research was to further examine secondary education leaders' perceptions of SAADs. Specifically, several research questions guide this research, including:

1) *How do secondary education leaders perceive the influence of SAADs on various school and community stakeholder groups?*

2) *What duties and responsibilities of SAADs are perceived as most important by secondary education leaders?*

3) *What professional skill sets and experiences do secondary education leaders perceive as essential to prepare SAADs for career success?*

4) *How do secondary education leaders perceive the need for relevant educational training for*

SAADs beyond traditional industry credentials?

2. Methodology

Research Procedure and Sample

Study respondents were selected from educational advisory groups associated with various district and building leaders who engage professionally with the local educational leadership degrees/courses of a large, state university located in the southern high plains of the United States. Faculty members who routinely work with and/or convene the advisory groups verbally discussed the project with members and received confirmation that they (e.g., respondents) were amenable to completing the survey. IRB-approved surveys were administered electronically using a Qualtrics link and sent to email accounts provided by respondents to the aforementioned faculty members. Once surveys were completed, responses were automatically entered into a downloadable spreadsheet to develop an electronic database. Survey records with missing or skipped questions were discarded from the analyses (n=48).

Survey questions included demographics and then four scales exploring secondary education leaders' perceptions of SAADs' impact, duties, professional preparation, and training. To measure RQ1 impact on other constituent groups including building leaders, teachers, coaches, students, and the surrounding community (e.g., "*As employees, SAADs impact…*"); duties and responsibilities (e.g., "*Regarding their duties, SAADs…*"); professional needs and preparation in skillsets such as budgeting, legal issues, and leadership (e.g., "*SAADs need to understand…*"); and the need for both educational training beyond an industry-provided credential, and an educational credential specifically designed for SAADs (e.g., "*SAADs would greatly benefit from…*"). Each scale was developed as a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses from 1=Low to 5=High.

3. Results

Using the questionnaire's demographic questions, the sample was mostly male (72.9%) as compared to female (27.1%), and exclusively self-reported identifying as Caucasian/white (100%). Almost 80% of the sample self-reported being between the ages of 35-44 (39.6%) and/or ages 45-54 (39.6%) and—as is typical with educational leaders—self-reported high degrees of educational attainment; over 55% having a master's degree, 29.2% having multiple master's degrees, and 14.6% having a doctorate degree (see Table 1).

Table 1

Percent of Respondents by Demographic Categories (n=48)

Variables	Percent (%)	N
Gender		
Male	72.9	35
Female	27.1	13
Race, ethnicity		
White	100	48
[1]Non-white	0	0
Age		
25-34	8.3	4
35-44	39.6	19
45-54	39.6	19
55-64	12.5	6
Above 64	0	0
Education		
Master's degree Multiple	56.3	27
master's degrees	29.2	14
Doctorate	14.6	7

[1]includes self-reports of Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx/Chicano/a, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian/Asian American, Multiracial, and International.

Professional experience was self-reported in terms of both their current position and the overall number of years working within secondary education. That is, respondents reported varying degrees of time within their current positions, with over 60% being fairly recent to their current position: 39.6% reported being within their first year, and 22.9% having 2-5 years in the position. The remaining respondents were slightly more seasoned, and included 16.7% being in years 6-10, 16.7% being within years 11-15. Only 4.2% of respondents had over 15 years of experience within their current position. Regarding overall experience within the educational industry, however, respondents reported substantial experience within the secondary education industry. That is, almost 65% of the sample reported more than 20 years of experience within secondary education, with an additional 16.6% reporting over a decade worth of experience. (See Table 2).

Table 2

Positional and Secondary Education Experience by Sample Respondents (n=48)

Variables	Percent (%)	N
Years in current position		
1ˢᵗ year	39.6	19
2-5 years	22.9	11
6-10 years	16.7	8
11-15 years	16.7	8
16-20 years	4.2	2
21-25 years More	0	0
than 25 years	0	0
Total years in secondary education		
1ˢᵗ year	6.3	3
2-5 years	2.1	1
6-10 years	10.4	5
11-15 years	4.2	2
16-20 years	12.5	6
21-25 years	33.3	16
More than 25 years	31.3	15

Regarding respondents by other school-related demographics, respondents worked primarily within public schools (95.8%) in largely suburban environments (75%), and within larger schools, such as 4A (10.4%), 5A (62.5%), and 6A (12.5%) school environments. Respondents included a diversity of district leaders, such as superintendents (20.8%) and assistant/associate/vice superintendents (2.1%), building leaders, such as principals (43.8%) and assistant/associate/vice principals (12.5%), and athletics/activities directors (12.5%) and assistant/associate/vice athletics/activities directors (8.3%).) (See Table 3).

Table 3

Percent of Respondents by School-Related Categories (n=48)

Variables	Percent (%)	N
School position/role		
Superintendent (district leader)	20.8	10
Asst/Assoc/vice superintendent (district leader)	2.1	1
Principal (building leader)	43.8	21
Asst/Assoc/vice principal (building leader)	12.5	6
Athletics/activities director	12.5	6
Asst/Assoc/vice athletics/activities director	8.3	4
School Type		
Public	95.8	46
Private	4.2	2
School Classification		
1A	6.3	3
2A	2.1	1
3A	6.3	3
4A	10.4	5
5A	62.5	30
6A	12.5	6
School Area		
Urban	6.3	3
Suburban	75	36
Rural	18.8	9

The following univariate results (e.g., descriptives) provide a useful description of the sample, including types of schools, and educational leaders' perceptions of secondary athletics/activities directors, their functions, important professional topics, and required skill sets. Regarding research question #1 ("*How do secondary education leaders perceive the influence of SAADs on various school and community stakeholder groups?*"), respondents noted that secondary athletics/activities directors have a distinct, wide-ranging, and measurable impact on other stakeholder groups within the secondary education setting. That is, there was overwhelming support for the view that SAADs impact numerous stakeholder groups, including building leaders (100%), other building teachers (100%), sports coaches (100%), all secondary students (97.9%), secondary student-athletes (100%), and the surrounding community (100%). (See Table 4).

Table 4

Respondents' Perceptions (n=48) of Athletics/Activities Directors' Impact on Other Employee Groups: Median, Mode, and Percent (%) Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Statement

As employees, Secondary Athletics/Activities Directors impact…	Mdn	Mode	[1]% agree or strongly agree
…building leaders	5	5	100
…other building teachers	5	5	100
…sports coaches	5	5	100
…all secondary students	5	5	97.9
…secondary student-athletes	5	5	100
…the surrounding community	5	5	100

[1] Likert-type scale ranges from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

Research question #2 ("*What duties and responsibilities of SAADs are perceived as most important by secondary education leaders?*") examines duties and responsibilities, with secondary education leaders overwhelmingly self-reporting the highly variegated nature of secondary athletics/activities directors' work. Specifically, respondents noted the impact secondary athletics/activities directors have on students and interscholastic sports, such as being responsible for students' education (100%), shaping policies and procedures governing interscholastic athletics (100%), coordinating schedules, events, and activities (100%), and being responsible for training coaches to be professionals (93.7%). The unique set of duties and responsibilities for this role, however, also extends to regularly engaging with a school's surrounding community (97.9%), having responsibilities like other building leaders (e.g., principals or assistant/associate/vice principals) (81.3%), and continually engaging, collaborating, and communicating with an increasingly diverse set of stakeholders (95.8%).

Only a small fraction of secondary education leaders noted that secondary athletics/activities directors engage only with sports-related personnel on a day-to-day basis (18.8%). Indeed, one comment from a survey respondent noted "This [serving as a secondary athletics/activities director] is one of the most dynamics [*sic*] and busiest positions in all of education. Athletic leaders interact with the public more than most administrators and teachers, have a big impact on how students progress, and are among the most visible in the community." (See Table 5).

Table 5

Respondents' Perceptions (n=48) of Athletics/Activities Directors' Duties and Responsibilities:
Median, Mode, and Percent (%) Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Statement

Regarding their duties, Secondary Athletics/Activities Directors…	Mdn	Mode	[1]% *agree* or *strongly agree*
…have a unique set of duties and responsibilities	5	5	97.9
…have responsibilities similar to other building leaders	4	4	81.3
…engage only with sports-related personnel on a day-to-day basis	2	2	18.8
…regularly engage with our community	5	5	97.9
…are responsible for students' education	4	4	100
…are responsible for training coaches to be professionals	5	5	93.7
…coordinate/develop schedules, events, and activities	5	5	100
…continually engage, collaborate, and communicate with an increasingly diverse set of stakeholders	5	5	95.8
…shape the policies and procedures governing interscholastic athletics	5	5	100

[1] Likert-type scale ranges from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

The third research question ("*What professional skill sets and experiences do secondary education leaders perceive as essential to prepare SAADs for career success?*") centers on secondary education leaders' perceptions of important professional topics and skill sets within interscholastic athletics administration. Important topics, sourced from the previous literature and current professionals, include budgeting and finance (95.8%), legal issues (100%), personnel management (100%), developing or refining strong interpersonal skills (100%), and issues of leadership and how to lead others (100%). (See Table 6).

The final question ("*How do secondary education leaders perceive the need for relevant educational training for SAADs beyond traditional industry credentials?*") briefly examines secondary education leaders' view of additional education or training for secondary athletics/ activities directors. That is, secondary education leaders reported that current or aspiring secondary athletics/activities directors need educational training beyond an industry-provided credential (e.g., NIAAA) (95.8%). Additionally, there was strong support for the need for educational credentials specifically designed for this particular audience and/or occupation (89.5%). (See Table 7).

Table 6

Respondents' Perceptions (n=48) of Athletics/activities Directors' Needs and Preparation: Median, Mode, and Percent (%) Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Statement

Secondary Athletics/Activities Directors need to understand…	Mdn	Mode	[1]% *agree or strongly agree*
…budgeting and finance	5	5	95.8
…legal issues	5	5	100
…personnel management	5	5	100
…strong interpersonal skills	5	5	100
…leadership and how to lead others	5	5	100

[1] Likert-type scale ranges from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

Table 7

Respondents' [1]Perceptions (n=48) of Athletics/Activities Directors' Educational Training: Median, Mode, and Percent (%) Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Statement

Secondary Athletics/Activities Directors Would Greatly Benefit from…	Mdn	Mode	[1]% *agree or strongly agree*
…educational training beyond an industry-provided credential (e.g., KIAAA, NIAAA)	5	5	95.8
…educational credentials specifically designed for athletics/ activities directors	5	5	89.5

[1] Likert-type scale ranges from 1 (low) to 5 (high)

4. Discussion

This research aimed to examine secondary education leaders' perceptions of SAADs. Several research questions guided this inquiry and examined secondary leaders' perceptions of SAADs related to their impact on various stakeholder groups, duties and responsibilities, needs and preparation, and educational training.

The findings of this study provided multiple insights into secondary education leaders' perceptions of SAADs' impact, duties, needs, and educational training. This study highlighted the perceived influence that SAADs have on diverse constituent groups, including building leaders, teachers, coaches, students, and the surrounding community. This broad scope of influence emphasizes the importance of the SAADs' role in managing athletic programs and contributing to their institutions' overall educational mission.

This study also confirms that SAADs have a unique set of duties and responsibilities that fall under the umbrella of the sport management academic discipline, such as drafting and enforcing policies and procedures, managing events, and expanding community relations (Fowler et al., 2017). In addition, SAADs must also promote student-athlete education and consistently engage with various stakeholders. These findings support previous research emphasizing the need for SAADs to possess diverse skills, including leadership, crisis management, ethical decision-making, and strong interpersonal skills (Lee et al., 2020; Faunce, 2020; Elam, 2022).

The results of this study also supported previous calls for additional training and educational credentials specifically designed for SAADs, in addition to and beyond the current industry-provided credentials. While current certification programs, like those from the NIAAA, provide a foundational level of competence, the current study echoes previous research, suggesting a need for more comprehensive and specialized educational opportunities to prepare SAADs for the complexities of their roles (Blackburn et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2014).

Despite the broad recognition of SAADs' influence, the study highlights gaps in current research exploring and connecting all the perceived roles of SAADs. Addressing this gap could facilitate better preparation for future SAADs as students and provide more robust support structures for their continued professional development.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illustrated how their educational leaders perceive the complex and evolving roles of SAADs in secondary education settings. This study's results suggested that SAADs play a vital role in the administration of interscholastic athletics and in contributing to their schools' broader educational and developmental goals. The perceptions of secondary education leaders in this study underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to the training and preparation of SAADs, emphasizing the importance of both existing certifications and opportunities to tailor continuing education programs better.

This study's findings hold several practical applications as well. For current and aspiring high school athletic directors, this study's findings highlight the importance of developing a diverse skill set beyond traditional sport management and educational disciplines. Skills in leadership, personnel management, risk mitigation, and interpersonal skills are increasingly critical for successfully navigating the role's responsibilities. SAADs should seek opportunities for professional development that focus on these areas, whether through formal education programs, workshops, or self-directed learning.

For sport management students aspiring to become high school ADs, the study suggests a need to pursue comprehensive education and training that includes sport-specific knowledge and competencies in educational leadership, ethical decision-making, and community engagement. Practical applied learning experiences, such as internships and mentorships with current athletic directors, can provide valuable insights into the daily realities and challenges of the role. By gaining experience in multiple environments (e.g., urban vs. rural schools, different school sizes), students can better prepare for the various educational and community contexts they may encounter in their future careers. Sport management students should also consider developing proficiency in digital platforms and social media, enhancing SAADs' abilities to connect with parents, students, and community members, and fostering a more inclusive and supportive athletic environment.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides significant insights into secondary education leaders' perceptions of SAADs, it has limitations. The sample was predominantly male and homogeneous in terms of race and school setting. Future research could benefit from a more extensive and diverse sample to capture a broader range of perspectives, including those from various demographic backgrounds and school settings.

Additionally, this study relied on quantitative data, which, while valuable for identifying general trends, may not capture the full complexity of how secondary education leaders perceive the experiences and challenges of SAADs. Future research could employ qualitative or mixed-methods approaches to better understand how the role of SAADs is viewed not only by secondary leaders but by their peers, the students they serve, and the various stakeholders they often engage with. For future research, we suggest longitudinal studies that explore how perceptions of the SAAD role evolve in response to changes in educational and athletic landscapes. Also, we recommend an exploration of the duties and tasks of SAADs to determine role clarity through job descriptions and onboarding practices. The perceptions of SAADs should also be evaluated about the clarity of their duties in comparison to secondary education leaders' perceptions to determine any gaps in the perceived role of SAADs in a complex and rapidly changing environment.

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Appendix

Additional Comments provided at the end of the survey:

- "This is one of the most dynamics and busiest positions in all of education. Athletic leaders interact with the public more than most administrators and teachers, have a big impact on how students progress, and are among the most visible in the community."
- "KELI Mentor, KLC, Leadership Blueprint, really anything to develop leadership skills helps all facets of education."
- "Working with adult/student conflict, coached sponsors to be strong program leaders."