

A Profile of Intercollegiate Athletics Conference Commissioners and Conferences

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Abstract

This study examined selected personal, educational, and professional demographic characteristics of intercollegiate athletics commissioners in conferences of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). Of ninety-two commissioners, seventy-five (81.5%) returned the questionnaires in completed and usable forms. Mean age of the respondents was 50.6 years and they ranged between ages 31 and 71. All of the respondents held a bachelors degree. More than one-third (36%) of such degrees were in the fields of health, physical education and recreation. The most frequently highest degrees were the masters, (48.0%), followed by doctorates (20.0%), and bachelors (18.6%). The respondents averaged over 20 years in administrative positions however, more than half of them (53.3%) had over 15 or more years of administrative experiences. They also earned salaries which averaged \$99,506 and ranged between \$53,000 and 200,000 per year. White American males (89.3%) were the largest group of respondents. The remaining respondents were women and minorities who accounted for one-tenth (10.6%) of the respondents. Further administrators who desires to become an intercollegiate conference commissioner will now be able to secure this information prior to entering the sports business world. They will be able to identify some of the significant undertakings that they will face as well as strategies for a potential career as an intercollegiate athletics administrator.

This exploratory description investigation was designed to identify a list of selected demographic characteristics associated with a group of intercollegiate athletics administrators identified as commissioners and the organization they manage, an intercollegiate

athletics conference. When reviewing the sport studies literature, no given definition existed which defined or described the meaning of an intercollegiate athletics conference. For the purpose of this presentation, a conference will be defined as a regional governing agency for an alliance of intercollegiate athletics programs of six or more member colleges and universities with similarities in educational and athletics goals and on the same competitive levels. Intercollegiate athletics conferences have been in existence for over 100 years. The Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association was the first to be established in 1888 (O'Leary, 1992; Quarterman, 1994). Currently more than 100 NCAA affiliated conferences exist. Two of the most recent conferences established were the Great Mid-West and Mid-Continent conferences in 1994.

Conferences primarily were first developed to help control player abuses and violations on a regional level which confronted intercollegiate athletics at many of the colleges and universities during the latter part of the 18th century. Conferences still exist for this reason as well as several others, including (a) *formulating and enforcing rules and regulations pertaining to the eligibility of student-athletes*, (b) *scheduling stability within geographic areas*, (c) *controlling travel expenses*, (d) *preventing inferior officiating*, (e) *preventing overtraining during pre-season*, (f) *assisting in the elimination of excessive football injuries*, (g) *controlling unruly spectators*, and (h) *lifting some of the political burden away from the individual member institutions* (Hansen, & Hallock, 1990; O'Leary, 1992, Quarterman, 1994).

Intercollegiate Athletics Conference Commissioners

Like other organizations in business, education, and industry, conferences do not operate without humans. Managers (administrators) are needed to perform the tasks, responsibilities, and direct the activities of a conference. Titles associated with the managers of athletics conferences are known as commissioners or executive directors. The term commissioners will be used in this presentation. Commissioners are the chief executive officers of conferences. When scanning announced job vacancies for the position of a commissioner in the latest issues of *The NCAA News* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, some such tasks and responsibilities included: (a) directing the work of a variety of subordinates—assistant administrators and support staff; (b) implementing conference goals and objectives; (c) implementing marketing strategies; (d) negotiating television contracts; (e) making long-range strategic plans; (f) maintaining financial records; (g) generating annual reports; (h) preparing an annual budget; (i) providing guidance for the budget committee; (j) planning, organizing, and documenting conference meetings; (k) planning and organizing all conference championship events; (l) interpreting the conference and national associations, i.e., NCAA and NAIA guidelines; (m) implementing a clearly defined governance structure for the conference; (n) serving as conference representative to the NCAA and all other external agencies; (o) ensuring compliance by all conference members with the NCAA and conference regulations and bylaws; (p) coordinating a competitive schedule for sport teams; (q) submitting all conference reports and forms to the NCAA and other agencies; (r) promoting representation and selection of conference teams, student-athletes, and coaches to national polls, NCAA committees, national honors and awards agencies; and (s) performing all duties as charged by the executive board, e.g., the Council of Member Institutions presidents.

In addition, such job listings also showed that commissioners are expected to possess a variety of personal and professional qualities,

some of which included: (a) a master's degree or equivalent experience; (b) ability to exhibit knowledge of NCAA regulations; (c) commitment to compliance of NCAA regulations; (d) commitment to gender equity; (e) experience in media relations; (f) evidence of creativity and high energy; (g) strong public relations, media, and promotional skills; (h) commitment to compliance with NCAA rules and regulations; (i) administrative experience in intercollegiate athletics, preferably at the campus level; (j) experience in negotiating contracts; (k) aggressive marketing and promotional techniques; (l) knowledge and understanding of intercollegiate athletics; (m) an excellent image in intercollegiate athletics; (n) ability to work with individuals and groups of diverse backgrounds; (o) a commitment to high standard of excellence; (p) equal commitment to men's and women's sport progress; (q) strong leadership and interpersonal skills; and (r) personal integrity.

The aforementioned expected tasks, responsibilities, and qualities of commissioners provide evidence that they are highly valued administrators of an intercollegiate athletics conference. As top level administrators they have a wide sphere of influence on the practice of intercollegiate athletics. Seemingly a descriptive profile of the demographic characteristics of such administrators would provide for scientific knowledge and theory development in undergraduate and graduate sport administration programs. Also, having this type of data available seems useful to both practitioners and research scholars.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to delineate selected personal, educational, and professional characteristics of intercollegiate athletics conference commissioners. One hundred and five administrators were identified as executives or commissioners in the 1992–93 *NCAA Directory*. Ninety two (87.0%) of such administrators were commissioners of conferences with member institutions for both male and female intercollegiate athletics and 13 (13.0%) were single sport conferences. Only

the conferences including male and female intercollegiate athletics were considered for this presentation. Of the ninety two commissioners contacted for this study, 35 (38.0%) were of NCAA Division I conferences, 22 (24.0%) were in Division II, and 35 (38.0%) were in Division III conferences.

In October and November 1993, the author mailed a self-reported questionnaire to 92 commissioners who were administrators of both male and female intercollegiate athletics programs. A cover letter outlining the purpose of the study and a self-addressed stamped envelope accompanied each questionnaire sent to the commissioners. As of February 1994, a response rate of 75 (81.5%) of the commissioners returned the survey in completed and usable form. Of the 75 respondents, 30 (40.0%) were employed in Division I conferences, 21 (28%) with Division II conferences, and 24 (32%) with Division III conferences (Figure 1). The data were coded and analyzed utilizing the software program SAS (SAS Institute, 1992).

Descriptive statistics were calculated to present data for three major components: (a) *personal demographic characteristics—including gender, race, and age*; (b) *educational demographic characteristics—including the highest degree earned, major in bachelor's degree, major in master's degree, major in doctorate degree, and the number of years since earning the highest degree*; and (c) *professional demographic characteristics—including employment status, NCAA Division, number of years as an administrator, number of years as a commissioner, and number of years in the current position*.

Personal Demographic Characteristics

Summaries of characteristics for gender, are presented in Figure 2. White American males (89.3%) were the largest group of respondents. Minorities or underrepresented populations accounted for only 10.6% of the respondents; including 5.3% African American males, 4.0% white American females; and

one (1.3%) person identified as a Native American male.

Shown in Table 1, the majority of the responding commissioners were male (96.0%). The average age of the respondents was 50.6 years and they ranged between ages 31 and 71. The 40–49 age group accounted for the largest group of commissioners when the groups were classified by age in decades. The age groups were also classified by career stages. Typically four career stages have been associated with age groups—exploration (≤ 30 years); establishment (31–45 years); maintenance (46–55 years); and decline (≥ 66 years) (Gould, 1979; Hall & Mansfield, 1975; Morrow & Elroy, 1987; Rosen & Jardee, 1985; Slocum & Cron, 1985). The largest portion of the commissioners (46.7%) was associated with the maintenance career group, meaning they were well established in their careers and lifestyles. The second largest number of respondents (36.0%) was associated with the establishment career stage. This stage implied that they had selected an occupation (being a commissioner) and had established a career path (as an intercollegiate athletics administrator). During this time some administrators continue on an upward track toward other higher echelon management positions, others may have reached a plateau in management and remain as a commissioner for the remaining time of their career.

Shown in Table 2 are the descriptive data based on age when the respondents first became commissioners. The average age when the respondents first became commissioners was 43 years; however, the range for such ages was as low as 23 and as high as 60 years of age. The largest group of respondents (73%) first became commissioners when they were between the fourth and fifth decades in age. Two-thirds of the respondents (66.2%) were associated with the establishment career stage when they became commissioners. Another finding was that as the commissioners' ages increased, the level of competition by NCAA Division decreased. Commissioners with the

Table 1
 Personal Demographic Characteristics (gender, race, and current age) of Intercollegiate Athletics Conference Commissioners

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Percentage commissioners responding	Accumulative	
					percentage commissioners	responding
Gender						
Males	72	--	--	96.0	--	--
Females	3	--	--	4.0	--	--
Race						
African Americans	4	--	--	5.3	--	--
Native Americans	1	--	--	1.3	--	--
White Americans	70	--	--	93.3	--	--
Current Age	74	50.6	31-71	--	--	--

(Table continues)

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Accumulative	
				Percentage commissioners responding	percentage commissioners responding
Age via Decades					
≤29 years	0	--	--	--	--
30-39 years	15	--	--	20.3	20.3
40-49 years	25	--	--	33.7	54.0
50-59 years	21	--	--	28.4	82.4
60-69 years	12	--	--	16.2	98.6
≥70 years	1	--	--	1.4	100.0
Age via Career Stages					
≤30 years - Exploration	0	--	--	--	--
31-45 years - Establishment	27	--	--	36.0	36.0
46-60 years - Maintenance	35	--	--	46.7	82.0
≥61 years - Decline	13	--	--	17.3	100.0

Table 2
 Personal Demographic Characteristics (age when first became a commissioner) of Intercollegiate Athletics Conference Commissioners

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Percentage commissioners responding	Accumulative	
					percentage commissioners	responding
Age (when first became a commissioner via decades)						
≤29 years	74	43.0	23-60	--	--	--
30-39 years	2	--	--	2.7	2.7	2.7
40-49 years	27	--	--	36.5	39.2	39.2
50-59 years	27	--	--	36.5	75.7	75.7
≥60 years	15	--	--	20.2	95.9	95.9
	3	--	--	4.1	100.0	100.0
Age (when first became a commissioner full-time)						
	42	41.9	23-60	--	--	--
Age (when first became a commissioner part-time)						
	32	45.9	32-60	--	--	--

(Table continues)

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Accumulative	
				Percentage commissioners responding	percentage commissioners responding
Age (when first became a commissioner - NCAA I)	32	39.9	23-60	--	--
Age (when first became a commissioner - NCAA II)	23	43.0	32-58	--	--
Age (when first became a commissioner - NCAA III)	20	45.9	32-60	--	--
Age (when first became a commissioner via career stages)	74	43	23-60	--	--
≤30 years - Exploration	3	--	--	4.1	4.1
31-45 years - Establishment	49	--	--	66.2	70.3
46-60 years - Maintenance	22	--	--	29.7	100.0
≥61 years - Decline	0	--	--	--	--

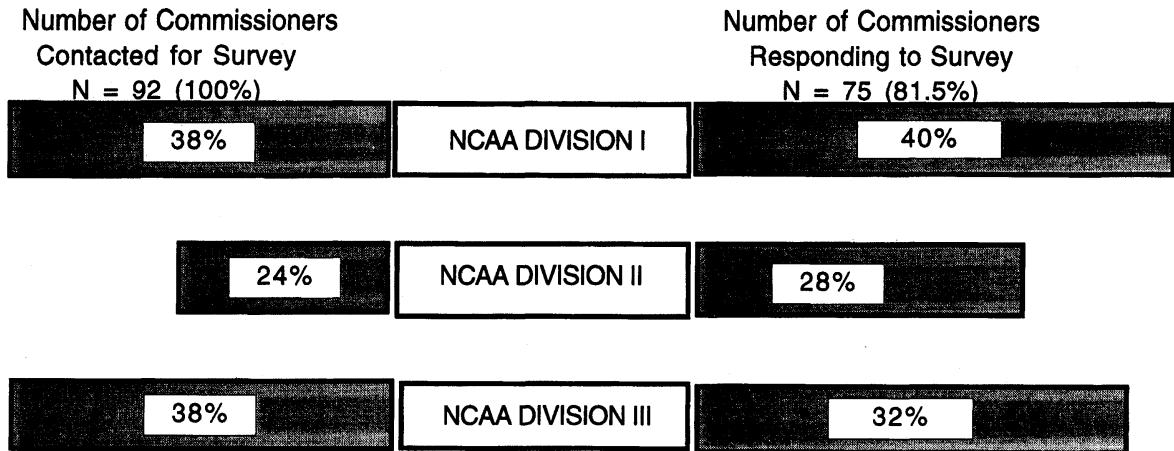


Figure 1. Number and percentage of commissioners (1992-93 NCAA Directory) compared to number and percentage of commissioners responding to the survey.

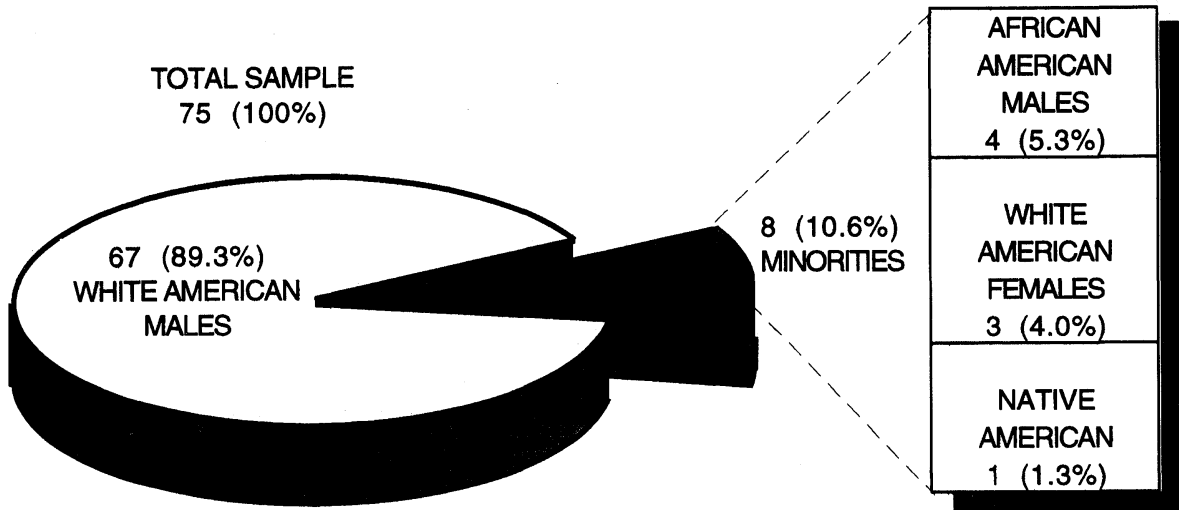


Figure 2. 10.6% of the responding commissioners were of minority status.

lowest mean age (39.9) were associated with NCAA Division I conferences, those with the second highest mean age (43.0) were associated with NCAA Division II conferences, and those with the highest mean age (45.9) were associated with NCAA Division III conferences.

Educational Demographic Characteristics

The responding commissioners were well educated. The most frequent highest educa-

tional degree held by the commissioners was a master's (48.0%), followed by doctorates (20.0%), and bachelor's (18.6%). Health, physical education, and recreation was the most popular major for both the bachelor's and master's degrees held by the commissioners (see Figure 3). All of them had a bachelor's degree and the largest proportion (36.0%) was in the field of health, physical education, and recreation. None of the commissioners had a bachelor's in sport adminis-

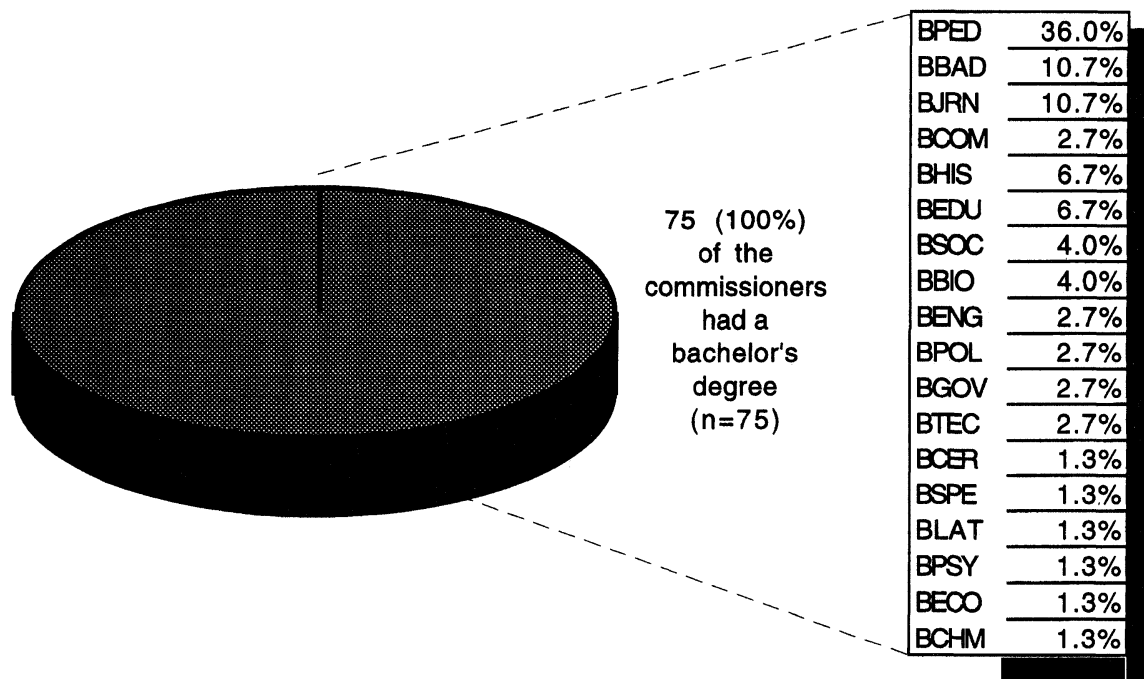


Figure 3. 75 (100%) of the commissioners had a bachelor's degree (n=75).

tration or sport management. This was more than likely attributed to undergraduate programs in sport management not being established until the 1970s and 1980s. It was not until 1971 that the first undergraduate degree program in sport management was offered at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst). Only two undergraduate programs existed in sport management in 1978 (Zakrajsek, 1993).

Shown in Figure 4 were the different kinds of majors in master's degrees held by the commissioners. Fifty three of the respondents reported their major in the master's degree. Of this amount, over one-third (35.8%) held a master's in MPED-health, physical education, and recreation. One in five held an undergraduate degree in MEDA-educational administration and MSPA-sport administration. This finding is different from those associated with the undergraduate degrees held in sport management. The master's degree programs were started in sport administration be-

fore the bachelor's degree programs. The first formal master's degree program was started at Ohio University in 1967. By 1978, there was a proliferation of master's degree programs in sport administration (n = 20); however, only a few undergraduate programs existed at this time (n = 2) (Zakrajsek, 1993). This is perhaps the rationale for more of the commissioners in this investigation to have more master's than bachelor's degrees in sport administration (management).

The finding also showed that administrative type degrees in education, sport, and business accounted for 40 percent of the degrees held at the master's level by the commissioners (shown in Figure 5). Twenty-two of the commissioners also held doctorate degrees. Surprisingly, the dominant degree was the Jurist Doctorate with nine (40.8%). This is more than likely attributed to increased litigation in intercollegiate athletics. Overall, the finding shows that the responding commissioners were well education and have completed de-

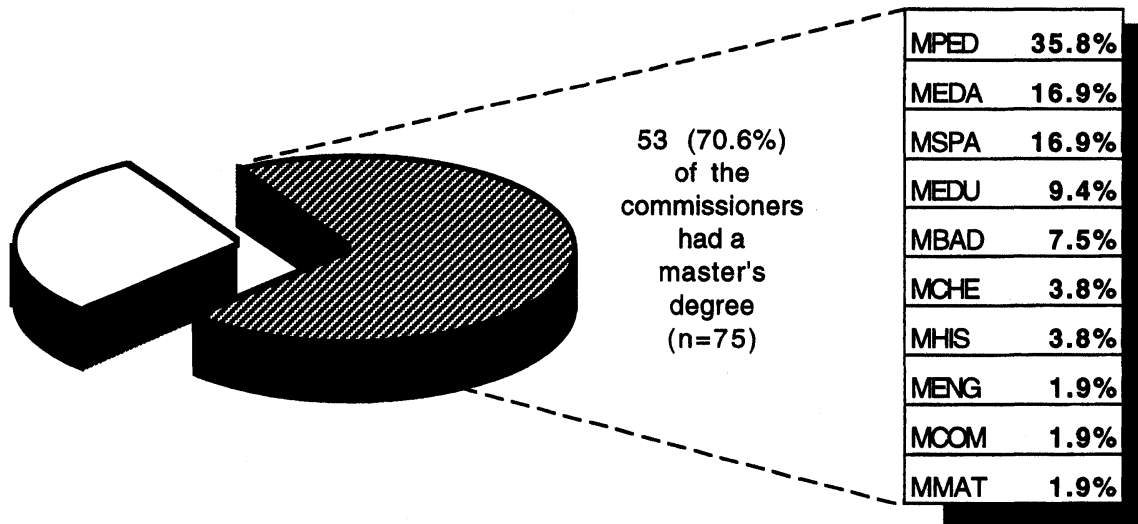


Figure 4. 53 (70.6%) of the commissioners had a master's degree (n=75).

gree requirements in a wide variety of subject areas in education, business, and the arts and sciences.

Professional Demographic Characteristics

A summary of the data for total years of experience as an administrator, years as a commissioner, and years in current position are portrayed in Table 3. Overall, the responding commissioners were well tenured as administrators. The group averaged 22.1 years and ranged between four months and 45 years in administrative positions. All of the respondents had ten or more years of experience as an administrator. Of this amount, over half (53.3%) had 15 or more years of administrative experience and one-third (33.3%) had 20 or more years of prior administrative experience. Surprisingly, a significant proportion of commissioners (14.7%) had 30 or more years of administrative experience.

When looking at the data in relation to tenure in years as a commissioner, the group averaged 7.9 years and ranged from four months to 22 years. Division III commissioners averaged the shortest tenure of 6.58 years as a commissioner; Division I commissioners averaged 7.23 years; and Division II commissioners averaged the longest tenures as com-

missioners, 7.93 years. Three-fourth (73.3%) of the respondents had five or more years of experience. The largest proportion (38.7%) had five to nine years of experience as a commissioner. Overall, this part of the survey tended to show that as years of experience being a commissioner increased, the number of commissioners responding decreased. Only two of the respondents had 20 or more years of experience as a commissioner.

It was further shown in Table 3 that the majority of the commissioners (73.3%) had been in their current positions less than ten years. Only one-fourth of the commissioners (26.7%) had been in their current positions beyond ten years. As with tenure in years as a commissioner, the findings reflected that as years in current position increased, the commissioners' tenure in their current position decreased. Only two of the respondents had 20 or more years of experience in their current position.

Organizational Demographic Characteristics

Shown in Table 4 are the summaries of the conference budgets and salaries of the responding commissioners. As speculated, the survey showed that the amounts of the budgets were directly related to the conference

levels of competition. That is, Division III conference budgets were the least amount, and Division IA conferences were the largest amounts. Commissioners of IA status (n = 22) managed enormous size budgets, ranging from \$150,000 to \$4,000,000, with an average of \$1,169,863 per conference. Division IAA (n = 5) had the second highest budgets, averaging \$503,277, and ranging between \$300,000 and \$850,000.

The budgets of the Division II and III conferences were much less than those of Division I status. The average budget for Division II conferences (n = 19) was \$173,431 and ranged from \$15,000 to \$1,537,000. Division III conference budgets averaged \$40,419 and ranged from \$3,000 to \$105,000. Two-thirds (66%) of the responding commissioners for the Division II and III conferences were of part-time status.

Television, bowl games, and the NCAA basketball tournament had been the major attributes for the enormous increase in the Division I conference budgets. In 1994, CBS signed a contractual agreement to pay the NCAA \$1.725 billion through the year 2002 to have television rights to all Division I basketball games ("IA Conferences Move," 1994). Also, "under the NCAA's revenue-sharing plan, [Division I conferences] will earn approximately \$75,000 in 1998 for each game a member [institution] plays in the tour-

namment in the preceding six years (1992-97) (Wieberg, 1994, pp. 6C-7C). Member institutions of the PAC-10 and Atlantic Coast conferences have had the most teams to compete in the tournament. More than 15 member schools participating have earned the PAC-10 an estimated \$1.184 million and 14 members participating have earned the ACC \$1.036 million (Wieberg, 1994, pp. 6C-7C).

The commissioners' salaries are also portrayed in Table 4. As with the budgets, salaries of full-time commissioners of Division I conferences were larger amounts than those in Divisions II and III. The data will only be reported for conferences with full-time commissioners (n = 22) of NCAA IA status. The average salary of the respondents was \$99,506 and ranged between \$53,000 and \$200,000. Nearly two thirds (63%) earned more than \$80,000 annually, almost one third (31%) earned \$90,000 or more, and nearly one fifth (18.3%) earned over \$100,000 per year.

The survey also showed that as age increased, salary increased among the full-time commissioners of NCAA IA status. Commissioners in the youngest age group (31-39 years) averaged \$90,571 per year; those in the 40-49 age group averaged \$96,021 per year; the 50-59 age group averaged \$98,500; and the oldest age group (60-69 years)

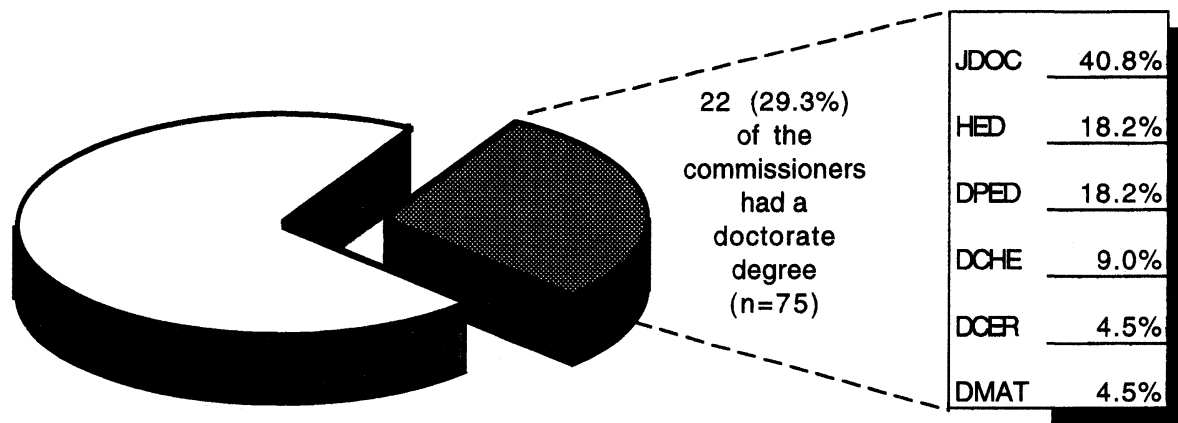


Figure 5. 22 (29.3%) of the commissioners had a doctorate degree (n=75).

Table 3
Professional Demographic Characteristics (by years of experience, years as a commissioner, and years in current position) of Intercollegiate Athletics Conference Commissioners

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Accumulative	
				Percentage commissioners responding	percentage commissioners responding
Years in Administration (all experiences)	75	22.1	1-45	--	--
10-14 years	14	--	--	18.7	18.7
15-19 years	21	--	--	28.0	46.7
20-24 years	15	--	--	20.0	66.7
25-29 years	7	--	--	9.3	76.0
30-34 years	7	--	--	9.3	85.3
≥35 years	11	--	--	14.7	100.0

(Table continues)

Characteristic	Number			Percentage			Accumulative
	commissioners	responding	Mean	Range	commissioners	responding	percentage commissioners responding
Years of Experience as a Commissioner							
≤4 years	74	74	7.9	1-21	--	--	--
5-9 years	20	20	--	--	26.7	26.7	26.7
10-14 years	29	29	--	--	38.7	38.7	65.4
15-19 years	15	15	--	--	20.0	20.0	85.4
20-24 years	9	9	--	--	12.0	12.0	97.4
≥25 years	2	2	--	--	2.6	2.6	100.0
0	0	0	--	--	--	--	--
Years in Current Position							
≤4 years	75	75	6.3	1-18	--	--	--
5-9 years	28	28	--	--	37.3	37.3	37.3
10-14 years	27	27	--	--	36.0	36.0	73.3
15-19 years	10	10	--	--	13.3	13.3	86.6
20-24 years	8	8	--	--	10.7	10.7	97.3
≥25 years	2	2	--	--	2.7	2.7	100.0
0	0	0	--	--	--	--	--

Table 4
Organizational Demographic Characteristics (conference budgets and commissioners' salaries)

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Accumulative	
				Percentage commissioners responding	percentage commissioners responding
Conference Budgets - NCAA III	21	\$40,419	\$3,000-\$105,000		
Conference Budgets - NCAA II	19	\$173,431	\$15,000-\$1,537,000		
Conference Budgets - NCAA IAA	5	\$503,277	\$300,000-\$850,000		
Conference Budgets - NCAA IA	22	\$1,169,863	\$150,000-\$4,000,000		
≤\$499,000	3	--	--	13.6	13.6
\$500,000-\$599,999	1	--	--	4.5	18.1
\$600,000-\$699,999	3	--	--	13.6	31.7
\$700,000-\$799,999	0	--	--	0.0	31.7
\$800,000-\$899,999	5	--	--	22.7	54.4
\$900,000-\$999,999	1	--	--	4.5	59.9
\$1,000,000-\$1,999,999	4	--	--	18.2	78.1
≥\$2,000,000	5	--	--	22.7	100.0

(Table continues)

Characteristic	Number commissioners responding	Mean	Range	Accumulative	
				Percentage commissioners responding	percentage commissioners responding
Commissioners' Salaries	22	\$99,506	\$53,000-\$200,000		
≤\$79,999	3	--	--	13.6	13.6
\$80,000-\$89,999	5	--	--	22.7	36.3
\$90,000-\$99,999	7	--	--	31.8	68.1
\$100,000-\$109,999	3	--	--	13.6	81.7
\$110,000-\$149,999	2	--	--	9.1	89.8
≥\$150,000	2	--	--	9.1	99.9
Commissioners' Salaries by Age Group					
(NCAA-IA)	22	\$99,506	\$53,000-\$200,000		
31-39 years of age	7	\$90,571	\$66,000-\$118,000	31.8	31.8
40-49 years of age	7	\$96,021	\$84,700-\$118,450	31.8	63.6
50-59 years of age	5	\$98,500	\$67,000-\$173,000	22.7	86.3
60-69 years of age	3	\$131,666	\$95,000-\$200,000	13.6	99.9

earned the highest average salaries of \$131,666 per year.

While the information presented in this investigation cannot be generalized, it is useful in several ways: First, it can be used to project a profile of those who are currently intercollegiate athletics conference commissioners. Secondly, the profile which emerged from this investigation may be used by college and university administrators, i.e., board of trustee members, college/university presidents, athletics directors, etc., as they attempt to recruit and select commissioners for their respective conferences. Third, sport administration instructors can use the findings to develop their classes which prepare undergraduate and graduate students as future athletics administrators. And fourth, this study provides baseline data for the development of more rigorous related scientific studies in the future.

This study has also brought to light the problem that underrepresented groups (i.e., African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and females) remain a serious problem as top level administrators in intercollegiate athletics programs. Of 74 responding commissioners in this study, only four (5.3%) were identified as African Americans; one (1.3%) as a Native American; and three (4.0%) white females. None of the other underrepresented groups were identified. Such findings call for further investigation which scientifically explore reasons why members of such groups are not represented as intercollegiate athletics commissioners.

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