

SENIOR WOMAN ADMINISTRATOR 201

# Overcoming Barriers to SWA Impact

While educating stakeholders (presidents, athletics and other institutional staff and student-athletes) about the SWA designation is a great first step to enhance the impact of the SWA, this resource lists common barriers faced by SWAs, and provides tips to overcome them. See SWA 101 on [ncaa.org](http://ncaa.org) for help with clarifying the purpose of the designation and engaging in open communication to optimize the SWA's role.

“ The SWA designation provides an important opportunity for women to provide input into key department decisions. Even in departments with multiple women in key positions, the SWA designation is an important role for campus and conference representation, and leads to more inclusive work environments across college athletics. ”



**Karen Peters**  
Senior Associate Athletics Director/SWA,  
University of Portland

“ This designation has been critical to the success of our department. The SWA is an integral part of all top-level decision making for us. She also serves as a valuable resource for our coaches, staff and student-athletes who seek guidance and support on a number of fronts throughout each academic year. ”



**Bernard Muir**  
The Jaquish & Kenninger Director of Athletics,  
Stanford University

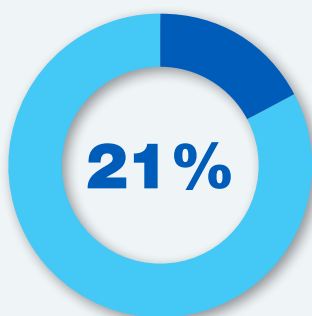
## What is the SWA?

The senior woman administrator (SWA) is the highest-ranking\* female involved in the management of an institution's intercollegiate athletics program. The intent of the SWA designation is to promote meaningful representation of women in the leadership and management of college sports.

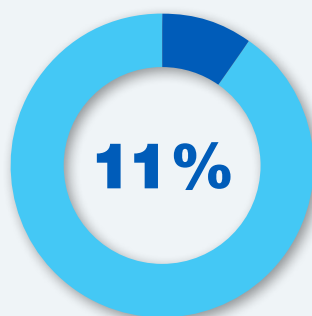
\*A school with a female director of athletics may designate a different woman as SWA.

## Division I Landscape

Women continue to be underrepresented in athletics administration.



21% of Division I schools have zero or one female administrators (2018-19).



11% of Division I ADs are women (2018-19).

A 2017 NCAA membership survey found a **perception gap** between ADs and SWAs about the extent to which ADs understand the SWA role. **53%** of SWAs believe their AD understands the role, compared with **95%** of ADs who believe they do.

In the same survey, **78%** of SWAs agreed the designation positively impacted their **career advancement**.

# How to Maximize SWA Impact: Overcoming Barriers

## 1 Capitalize on Diverse Leadership Perspectives

**BARRIER:** The SWA may not have adequate access to information or appropriate authority to make decisions.

### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Invite the AD to review the SWA 101 documents on [ncaa.org](http://ncaa.org) with you. Ask or offer suggestions about how you can help the program, and provide substantive feedback about department issues, dynamics and culture. Be clear about what you need to be successful in this role, and ask for feedback on your work.
- Proactively build relationships with your AD and other senior staff, and be excellent in your role. Recognize that not all professional relationships are productive. You may need to change jobs to find colleagues with whom you can build trust.

### TIPS FOR ADs

- Be intentional about engaging the SWA in significant decisions (e.g., contract negotiations, donor meetings, budget development and oversight). Be clear about the SWA's value with staff and student-athletes. Publicly engage and recognize her leadership.
- Partner with your SWA to identify performance goals specific to the SWA designation, and give her constructive feedback.

**BARRIER:** The SWA may have too many responsibilities to be intentional with the designation.

### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Educate yourself about the role of the SWA and be honest about whether you can be effective. Identify work that could be managed by others and collaborate with your AD regarding distribution of responsibilities.

### TIPS FOR ADs

- Educate yourself about the role of the SWA and hold yourself and other ADs accountable for taking action to maximize the role. Create time and space for the SWA to engage in senior leadership activities.

**BARRIER:** It may not be clear who to name as SWA (i.e., there may be several senior-level women, or individuals who do not want the designation).

### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Regardless of your seniority in the department, take advantage of the many opportunities that come with this designation to gain leadership, visibility and decision-making opportunities (e.g., access to grant funds, professional development initiatives, NCAA and conference governance).

### TIPS FOR ADs

- Be intentional in SWA selection – focus on ability to lead and impact the department rather than just overseeing a specific area.

**BARRIER: The SWA designation may create a sense of isolation if it is seen as the “solo woman administrator” rather than enhancing the number of women in senior leadership roles.**

#### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Review the reasons the SWA designation remains important (see the NCAA SWA 101 document) and communicate the value of the role across the industry. Discuss key issues with other staff and bring multiple perspectives to meetings and other decision-making opportunities. Embrace your role as a campus leader by serving on committees outside of athletics. Look for a mentor or confidant outside your department.
- Embrace your role as a campus leader by serving on committees outside of athletics. Seek external opportunities to share concerns and brainstorm solutions to challenges, which could include networking with other SWAs in your conference.

#### TIPS FOR ADs

- Strive to create a leadership team that reflects the gender diversity of the student-athlete population and includes varying perspectives in decision making. Consider ways of promoting women within the department to enhance operations and strategy.
- Encourage the SWA to participate in networking opportunities with other leaders on campus and within the conference. Provide release time to attend meetings.

## 2 Share Commitment to Equity and Well-Being

**BARRIER: The misperception that the SWA designation is solely focused on gender equity or women’s sports can limit additional leadership opportunities.**

#### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Be visible with your leadership activities in the department and through your presence at men’s and women’s events. Share your diverse responsibilities with department and campus colleagues and ask to be involved in senior-level discussions (budget, development, etc.).

#### TIPS FOR ADs

- Ensure that the SWA’s responsibilities are broader than women’s sports and gender equity oversight. Clarify that the SWA provides leadership on men’s and women’s sports, and that gender equity oversight is a priority for all staff.

**BARRIER: Other department leaders may not take an active role in gender equity after this responsibility is delegated to the SWA or other staff.**

#### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Provide important updates to your AD and other staff. Help educate those who might not understand Title IX. Propose roles for other staff members (e.g., assign diversity programming efforts to males and other department staff) so all parties are invested in equity.

#### TIPS FOR ADs

- Be intentional about including equity and well-being in senior and full staff meetings and engage all staff members in addressing issues of concern. Review Title IX compliance status annually and reference equity and well-being in all athletics job descriptions.

## 3 Support Training and Mentoring Opportunities

**BARRIER: There may be a lack of funding to attend professional conventions or events.**

#### TIPS FOR SWAs

- Pursue grants – there are many available! See [ncaa.org](http://ncaa.org) for a list of events with financial assistance. Pursue local or conference-based professional development. Review opportunities of interest and present a plan to the AD addressing time away from campus and budget impact.

#### TIPS FOR ADs

- Invest in the professional development of your SWA. Consider partial funding or periodic opportunities (every other year, etc.) if regular support is not feasible. Learn about grants and external sources of funding and advocate for your SWA’s access to them.

**BARRIER: It is difficult to make time for professional development.**

**TIPS FOR SWAs**

- Make your own development a priority, both to enhance your skills and to model for others. On-campus or virtual opportunities may be less time intensive than traveling to events. Often, HR offices can provide access to training for general leadership and supervisory skills.

**TIPS FOR ADs**

- Provide general professional development opportunities (leadership, public speaking, etc.) to increase skills and confidence. Target important skills with which your SWA may have less experience.

## 4 Involve SWAs in Conference Governance

**BARRIER: The variety of SWA responsibilities across the conference can make it difficult to build substantive agendas.**

**TIPS FOR SWAs**

- Ask your peer SWAs about shared areas of responsibility or interest. Propose substantive, standing agenda items or impactful projects for conference engagement.
- Bring substance to conference discussion based on your observations and experiences.

**TIPS FOR ADs**

- Engage your SWAs in a broad range of issues. Encourage your conference to assign significant discussion items to the SWA group.
- Schedule SWA meetings to allow for attendance at other substantive conference meetings.

## 5 Engage SWAs in National Issues

**BARRIER: It is difficult to leave campus for events outside of regular job responsibilities.**

**TIPS FOR SWAs**

- Identify which campus responsibilities are of highest priority and consider sharing other tasks with colleagues. Recognize how understanding the national landscape can enhance your impact on campus.

**TIPS FOR ADs**

- Enable the SWA to prioritize her schedule and support attendance at events that feel least disruptive to other responsibilities, even if this increases travel cost.

**BARRIER: It may be difficult to be selected to serve on national committees or get engaged in national issues.**

**TIPS FOR SWAs**

- Understand the committee process and communicate your interest and desire for engagement with those who submit nominations or make selections. Pursue opportunities with a variety of organizations – NCAA, NACDA, Women Leaders in College Sports, etc.

**TIPS FOR ADs**

- Encourage committee service and act as a reference for the SWA for both conference and national committees.