



The Pipeline Project

10-Year Athletic Director Hiring Trends, NCAA Division I 2015–2024

By Meg G. Hancock, Nicholas Kopka, & Ehren R. Green

How to Cite

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Meet the Team



Dr. Meg Hancock (she/they), an associate professor at the University of Louisville, is passionate about gender and diversity in the workplace. With 40+ publications and 50+ conference presentations, Meg aims to create inclusive and inspiring communities within sports organizations. She helps individuals achieve career goals in collegiate and professional sports. Outside work, Meg enjoys coffee, outdoor activities, and traveling with spouse Bridget, and their dogs, Chaco and Roux.



Nick Kopka (he/him), a doctoral student at the University of Louisville, is researching the social impact of sport tourism. Before pursuing his doctoral degree, he gained experience with the Louisville Sports Commission, the 500 Festival, and the Shreveport-Bossier Sports Commission. He has experience in event management, sales, volunteer recruitment, and budget oversight. He is an alum of Ball State University (BS) Ohio University (MBA, MS).



Dr. Ehren Green (she/her), an assistant professor at Temple University, has a deep passion for creating positive work environments in sports organizations. As a former student-athlete, intercollegiate athletics employee, and spouse of a coach, sports run in her blood. She's also a proud mom and enjoys dominating on the soccer field with her 2 boys. When not playing soccer, they're busy planning their next travel adventures. In addition to her love for sports, she enjoys good comedies and engaging conversations.

How to Cite

Hancock, M.G., Kopka, N., & Green, E.R. (2025). The Pipeline Project: 10-Year Athletic Director Hiring Trends, NCAA Division 1, 2015-2024 [white paper]. University of Louisville.



About The Pipeline Project

The Pipeline Project explores the state of women in intercollegiate athletic administration. Historically, the “pipeline” has referred to title positions of assistant athletic director and associate athletic director (3). Individuals holding senior-level positions are perceived to be more likely to achieve an Athletic Director position because the skill sets associated with senior-level administration, such as budgeting, fundraising, and supervisory responsibility, are perceived to be more transferable to the position of Athletic Director (4). This report extends the pipeline to look at hiring trends for the title of athletic director.

The Pipeline Project serves as a vital resource for those committed to advancing gender equity in intercollegiate athletics. It provides athletic administrators, professional organizations, and sports managers with data-driven insights into gender representation, employment trends, and diversity within leadership structures. Moreover, it acts as a benchmarking tool, allowing institutions to compare their progress in achieving gender equity against others. Athletic department and industry leaders can identify gaps and develop strategies to create more inclusive and equitable pathways for women. The Pipeline Project also encourages researchers and educators to use its data for future research on gender dynamics in college sports leadership. This focus on gender equity is essential for building a sustainable, diverse leadership pipeline in college athletics—one where women have equal opportunities to advance, lead, and shape the future of the industry.

PLEASE NOTE: This document contains hyperlinks to additional resources for industry practitioners, prospective employees, and students, with further references listed in the appendices. Any text that is underlined is hyperlinked to a resource.

How to Use this Data

The Pipeline Project data can be used in several impactful ways by sport administrators, researchers, and students, depending on their roles and objectives.

1. College Athletic Administrators

- **Talent Retention and Development:** Universities and athletic departments can use this data to address high turnover rates by creating retention programs, professional development opportunities, and leadership pathways that encourage both entry- and mid-level staff to remain in the field.
- **Hiring and Promotion Policies:** By understanding where women and other underrepresented groups are less likely to advance (e.g., mid- to executive-level positions), administrators can develop targeted strategies to improve hiring and promotion practices, ensuring a more inclusive environment.
- **Benchmarking Against Peers:** Administrators can compare their department's gender diversity metrics with other departments in their conference or across the NCAA Division I FBS to gauge their progress in fostering equitable work environments. This can help identify areas where their departments may fall short in promoting gender equity.

2. Sports Management Professionals

- **Strategic Career Planning:** Professionals in the sports industry can use the data to understand career progression trends, helping them identify potential challenges and opportunities at various career stages. This can guide their professional development and networking strategies.
- **Mentorship and Advocacy:** Senior professionals can identify gaps in the pipeline and create mentorship programs or advocacy initiatives to support women and underrepresented groups, helping them navigate career advancement more effectively.
- **Sport Segmentation:** Sport management professionals in other segments of the industry (e.g., professional, interscholastic) can utilize the pipeline to examine their own pipeline.

3. Researchers and Educators

- **Building Research Agendas:** Scholars can use this data as a foundation for new research on gender diversity, career progression, and employment trends in sports management. This could include deeper investigations into the factors driving high turnover rates or barriers to advancement for women.
- **Identifying Research Gaps:** The report highlights areas where data on race, ethnicity, and non-binary identities are lacking, offering scholars the opportunity to expand future studies into these critical areas of diversity and inclusion.

4. Policy Makers and Advocacy Groups

- **Shaping Inclusion & Engagement Initiatives:** Organizations focused on gender equity in sports can use this data to create or refine advocacy programs aimed at increasing the representation of women in leadership roles within intercollegiate athletics.

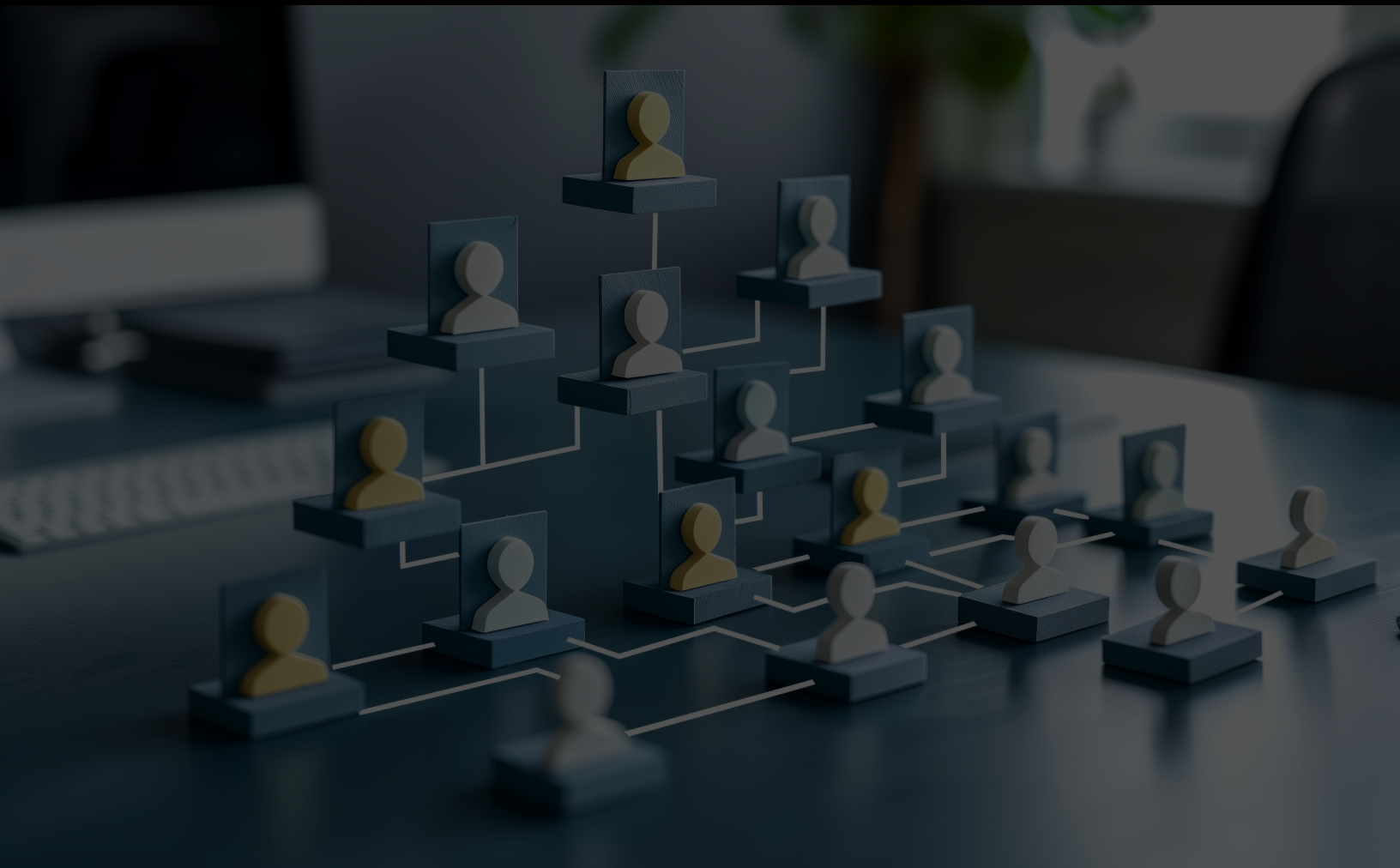
Informed Decision-Making: By using this report's findings, policymakers can make data-driven decisions to implement diversity standards and enforce more equitable hiring practices at institutional and conference levels.

5. Prospective Employees in College Athletics

- **Career Navigation:** Aspiring professionals can use the data to understand the gender distribution across career stages, helping them navigate their paths and identify which departments or conferences may offer more inclusive environments.

In summary, *The Pipeline Project* data should be used as a tool to foster more equitable, inclusive environments in intercollegiate athletics to drive meaningful change at both organizational and industry-wide levels.

⁰⁶ Athletic Director Hiring Trends Overview



Study Overview

The Pipeline Project: 10-Year Hiring Trends

With the increased professionalization and commercialization of college sport, the role of Division I intercollegiate athletic directors continues to evolve. These executives must consider a changing legal landscape (e.g., Name, Image, and Likeness; House v. NCAA); long-term, multi-million dollar television and media contracts; conference realignments; revenue distribution; and, organizational and personnel changes. Now more than ever, athletic directors need to understand strategic planning and financial operations; human resources; legal impacts of state, federal, and NCAA legislation; and, opportunities to generate, grow, and sustain revenue streams we enter a more professionalized era of college sport.

The Pipeline Project: 10-Year Athletic Director Hiring Trends offers an in-depth look at how and where men and women lead athletic departments in all NCAA Division I Subdivisions [i.e., Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), and Non-Football Subdivision]. For this report, we analyzed data from an existing database to explore the hiring trends of athletic directors over a 10-year period. This report offers data aggregated across NCAA Division I institutions, by division (i.e., FBS and Subdivisions), the involvement of search firms, and pre-/post-NIL era hiring observations.

A key goal of The Pipeline Project is to uncover "leaks" in the talent pipeline, where women are systematically underrepresented (5) or encounter barriers to advancement (6). These leaks occur both within specific job areas and at critical career stages, underscoring a broader issue of gender equity in college sports leadership. Therefore, we also examined gender representation in the AD role over time and highlight areas of progress.

Data for this project was collected from an existing database in January 2025. The research team acknowledges that roles and positions in intercollegiate athletic departments are dynamic and often change. As such, this is a retrospective report based on data collected from 2015 to 2024.

Key Findings

Key findings are based on data collected and aggregated over a 10-year period, 2015 to 2024. This section includes a summary of findings across all NCAA Division I institutions, as well as findings specific to each Division I subdivision (i.e., Football Bowl Subdivision, Football Championship Subdivision, and Non-Football Subdivision), search firms, and post-Name, Image, and Likeness.

Summary of Findings (all NCAA Division I subdivisions)

- NCAA Division I institutions hired 471 athletic directors over the 10-year period;
- On average, 47 athletic directors were hired in a given year;
- 86% of NCAA Division I institutions hired at least one athletic director during the 10-year period;
- 42% of institutions hired at least 2 athletic directors during the 10-year period;
- Women comprised 15% of the athletic director hires;
- Fourteen women ADs were hired in 2024 -- the highest number of women hired during the 10-year period;
- 77% of all athletic directors hired were at institutions in the FCS or Non-Football subdivisions
- The net gain of women in athletic director positions was 18.
- 364 athletic directors hired were external (e.g., from another school, conference, or industry); of this group, 15% were women.
- Of the 104 athletic directors that were hired internally (e.g., held an interim tag; national search, but internal candidate), 25% were women.

Search Firm Observations

- Search firms were involved in 57% of athletic director hires;
- Top three most utilized search firms: Parker Executive Search (31%), Collegiate Sports Associates (22%), TurnkeyZRG (13%).
- When firms were involved, women were hired 15% of the time, while men were hired 85% of the time;
- When firms were NOT used in the AD search process, women were hired at a rate of 19%, while men were hired 81% of the time.

Post-NIL Observations (2021 to Present)

- Post NIL, the average number of athletic directors hired annually jumped 13% from 47 (2015-2020) to 51;
- The average annual number of search firms involved in AD hires jumped 33% from 24 (2015-2020) to 32;
- Since 2021, 63% of AD hires have been assisted by search firms compared to 53% prior to the inception of NIL;
- The use of search firms in hiring an AD has increased across every NCAA Division I subdivision since 2021;
- The average number of women athletic directors hired post-NIL has increased in FCS and Non-Football subdivisions.

NCAA Division I Athletic Director Hiring Trends 2015–2024

Aggregated Overview

Data on in this section is aggregated from institutions in Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), Football Championship Subdivision (FCS), and Non-Football Subdivision.



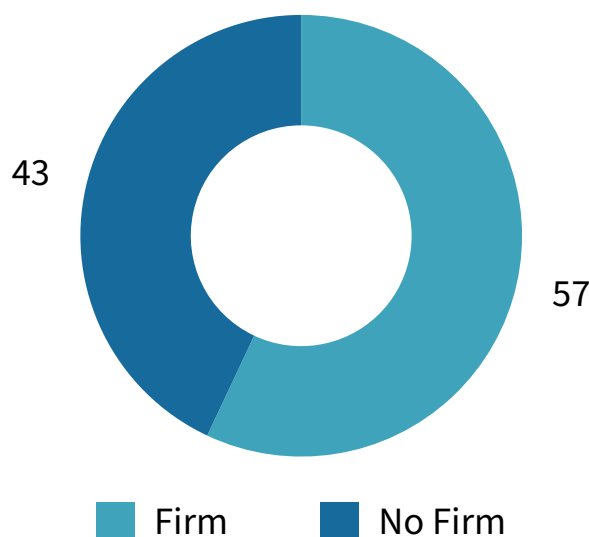
NCAA Division I Athletic Director Hiring Trends 2015-2024

471

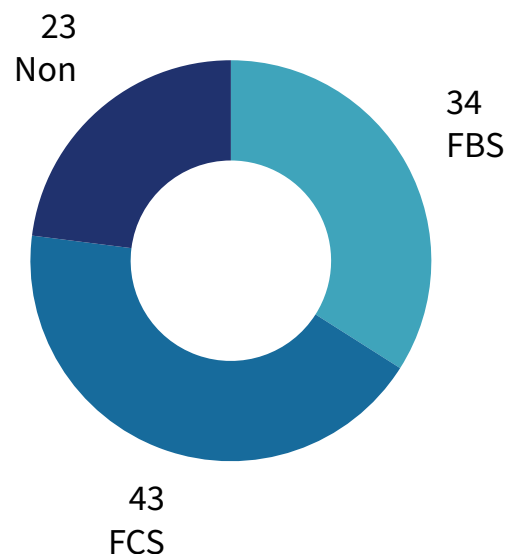
**Total Athletic
Directors Hired**

306

**Unique Colleges &
Universities Hired ADs**



**% of Institutions Employing
Search Firms**



**% of AD Hires by
Subdivision**

86%

**NCAA Division I
Institutions Hired an AD**

42%

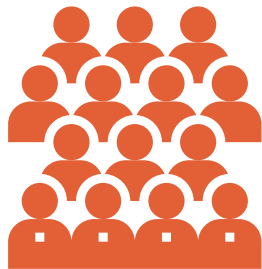
**Departments
Hiring 2+ ADs**

NCAA Division I Athletic Director Hiring Trends 2015-2024

Total # of ADs Hired

471

Across NCAA Division I
Institutions

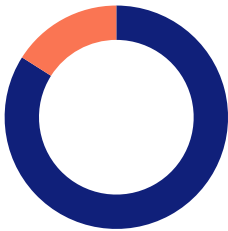


78

Women

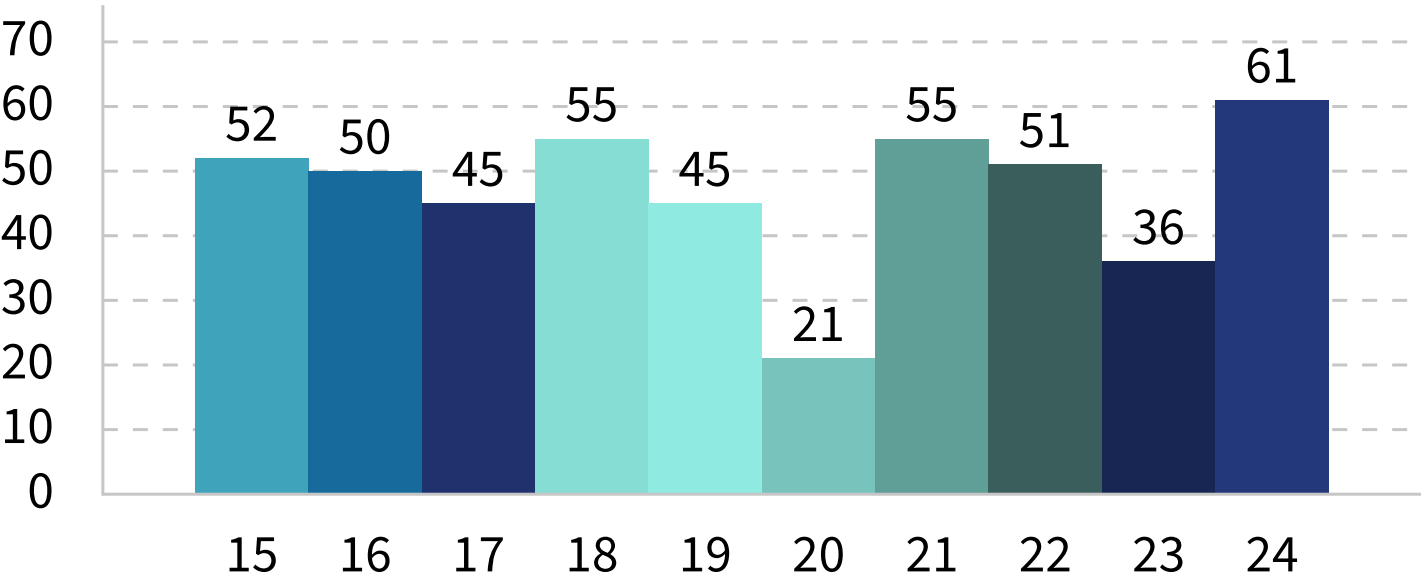
393

Men

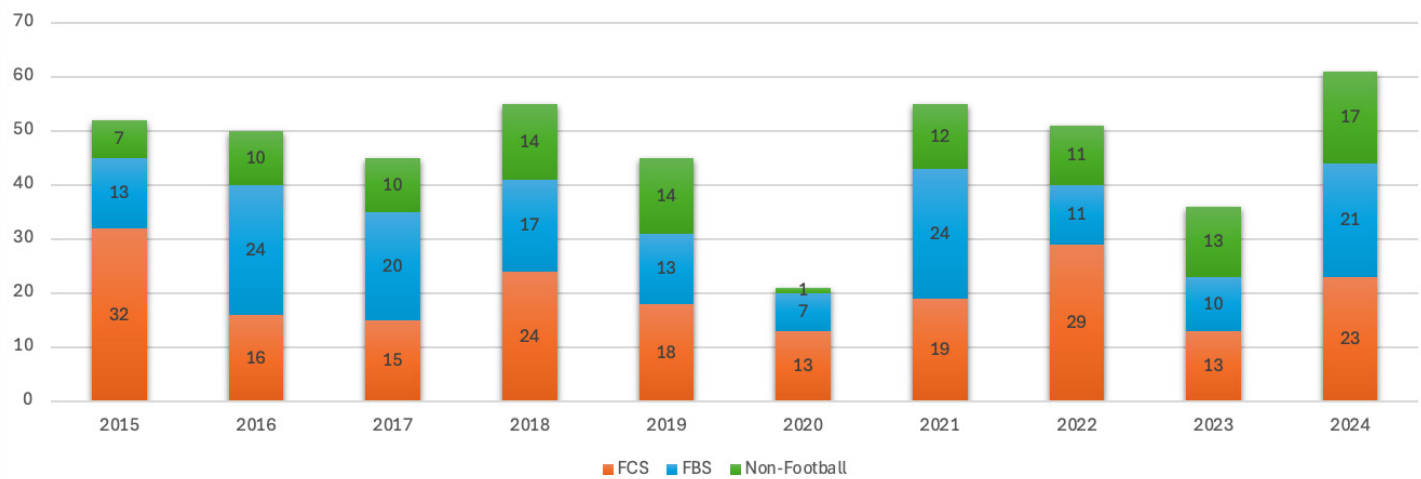


Men (84)
Women (16)

of ADs Hired by Year

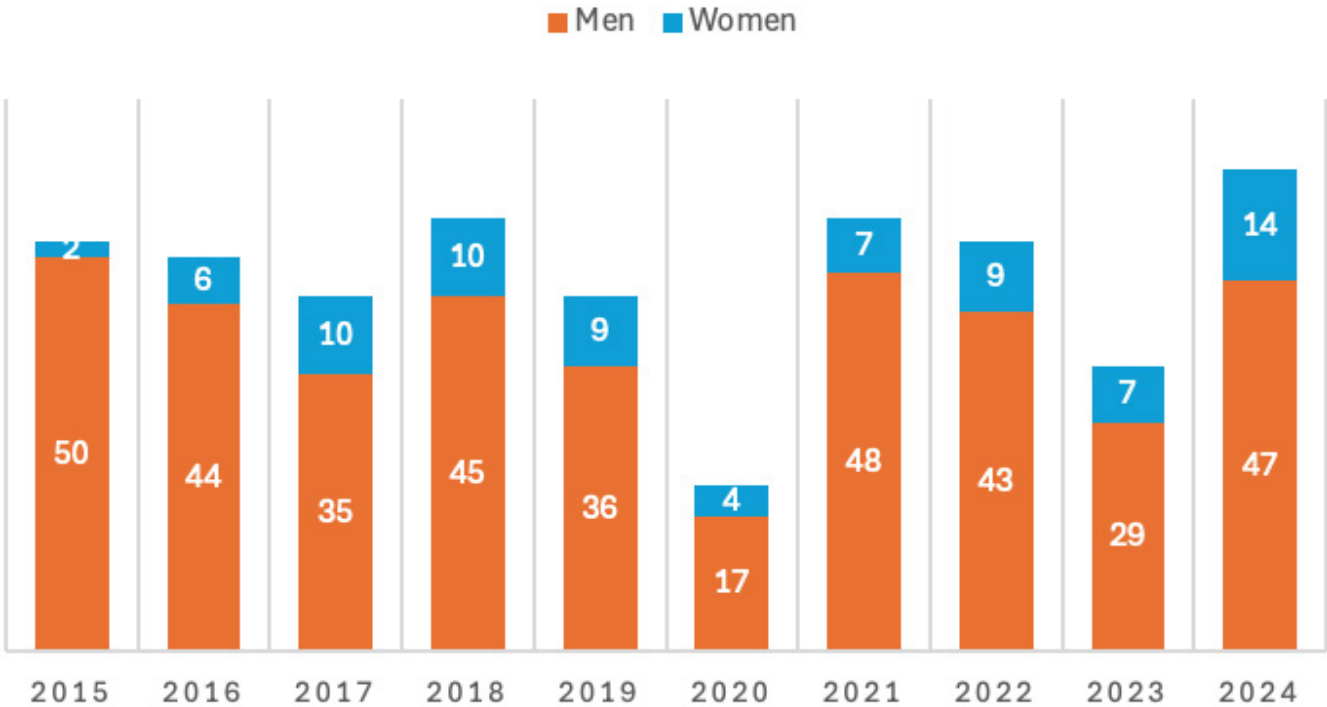


Total ADs Hired by Subdivision & Year

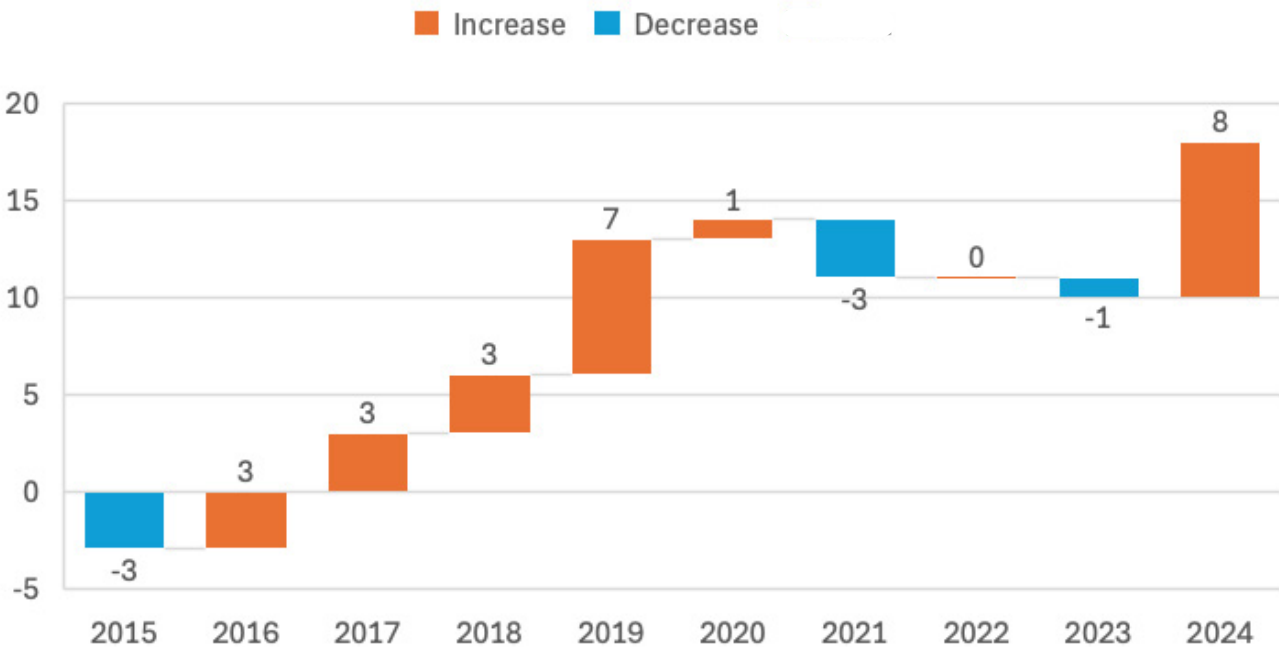


NCAA Division I Athletic Director Hiring Trends Gender, 2015-2024

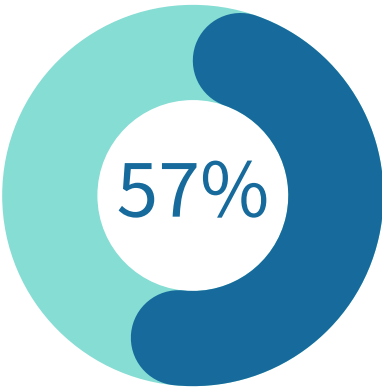
Athletic Director Hires by Gender & Year



Net Women ADs Year over Year

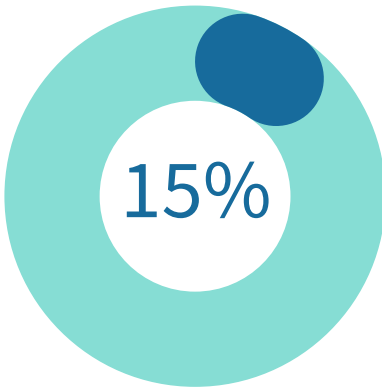


NCAA Division I Athletic Director Hiring Trends Use of Search Firms, 2015-2024

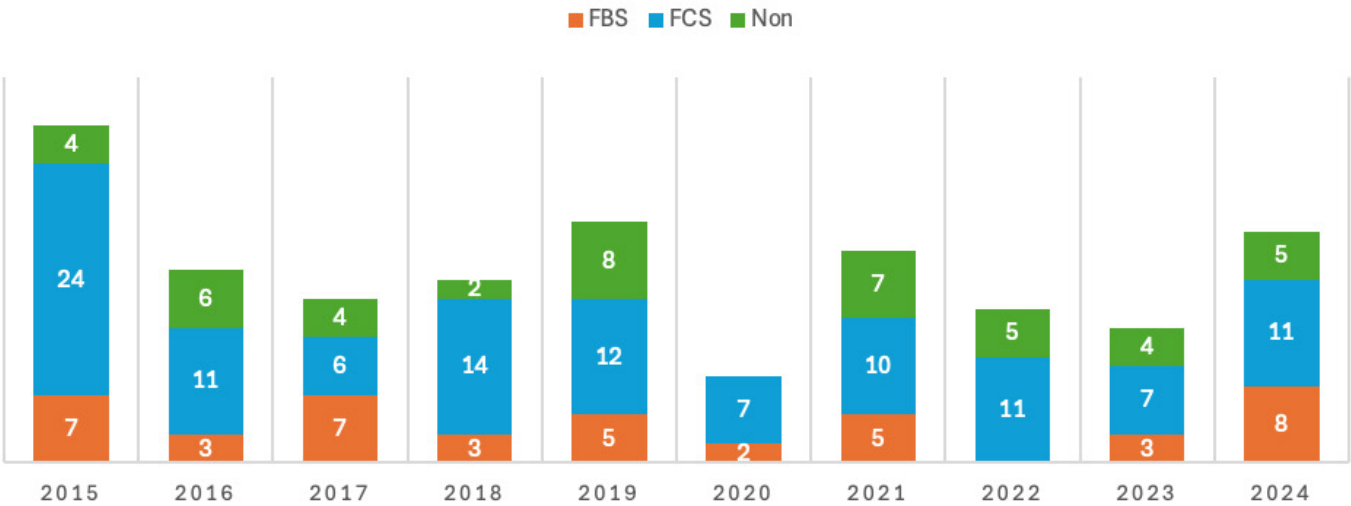


**% of Institutions
Employing
Search Firms**

**% of women ADs
hired by search
firms**

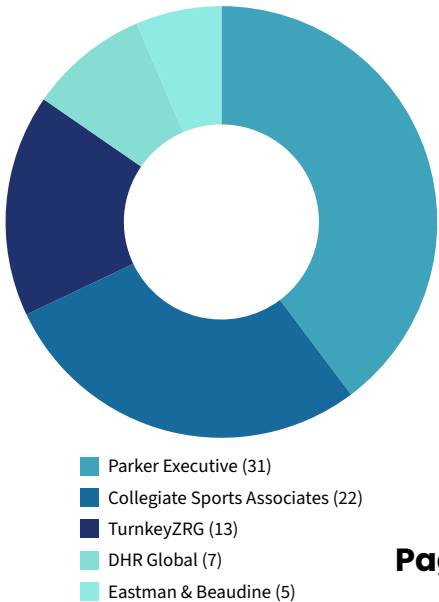


Search Firms Employed by Subdivision



Top 5* Most Employed Search Firms & Percentage of Hires

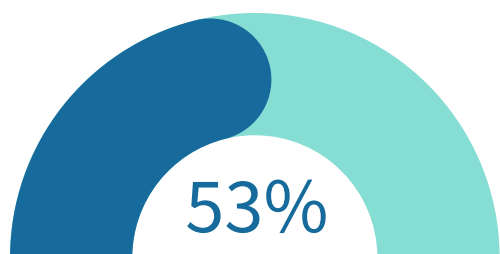
*Top 5 firms account for 78% of all search firm hires



NCAA Division I Athletic Director Hiring Trends

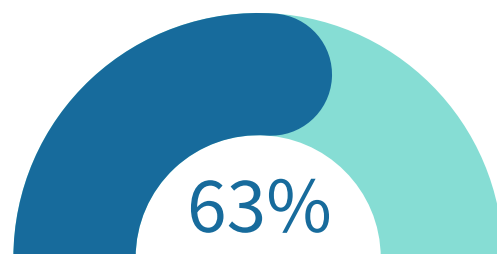
Pre & Post Name, Image & Likeness

	Avg. # AD Hires/ Year 2015-2020	Avg. # AD Hires/ Year 2021-2024	% Change
OVERALL	45	51	+13%
Men	38	42	+10%
Women	7	9	+29%
Search Firm	24	32	+33%
No Firm	21	19	-10%



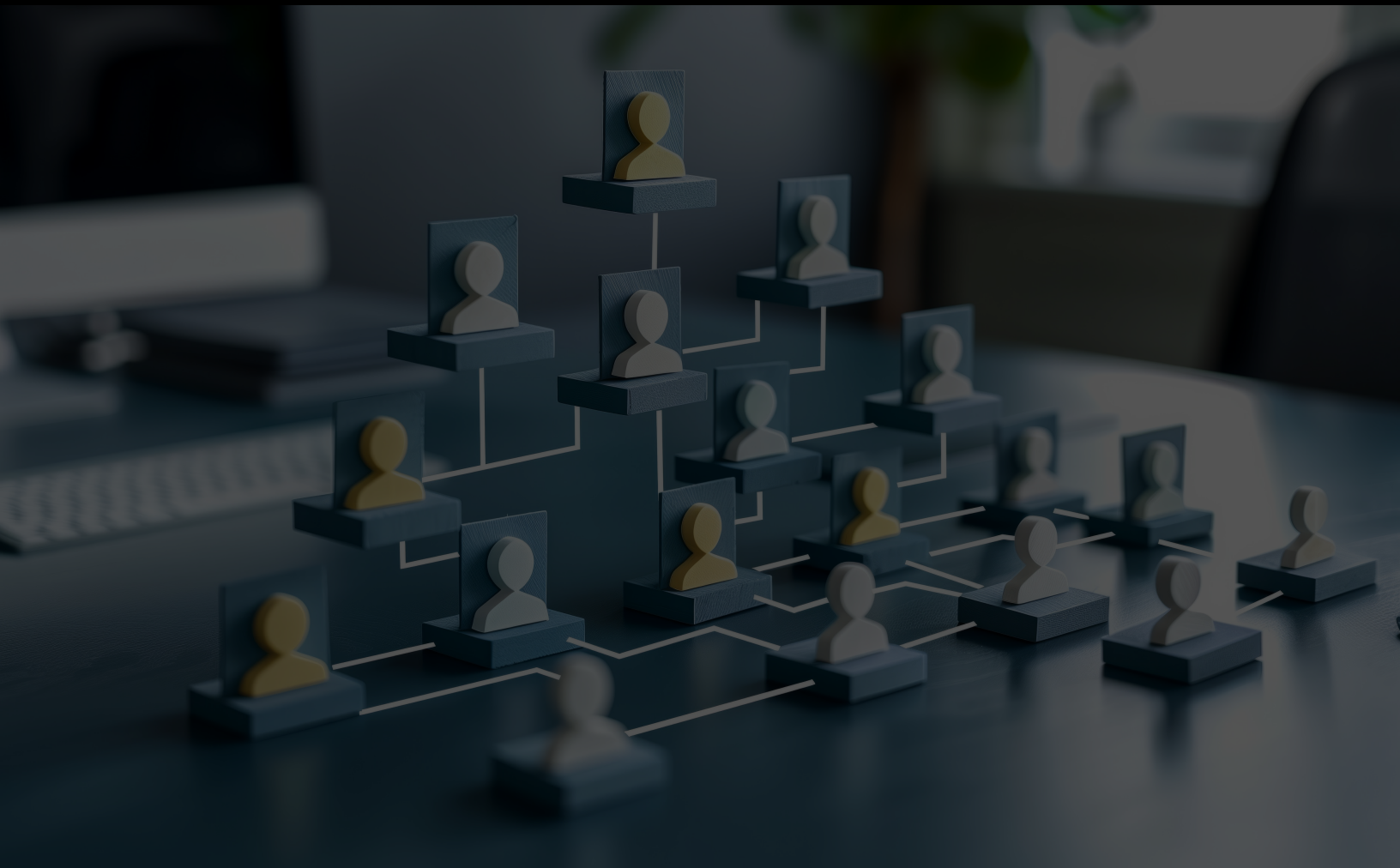
Pre-NIL
2015-2020

**Overall Use of
Search Firms**



Post-NIL
2021-2024

15 Football Bowl Subdivision Aggregated Overview

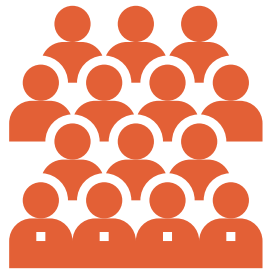


Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Athletic Director Hiring Trends 2015-2024

Total # of ADs Hired

160

Across NCAA Division I
FBS Institutions

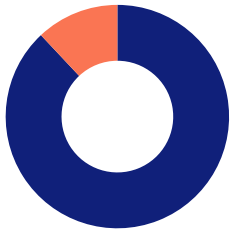


19

Women

141

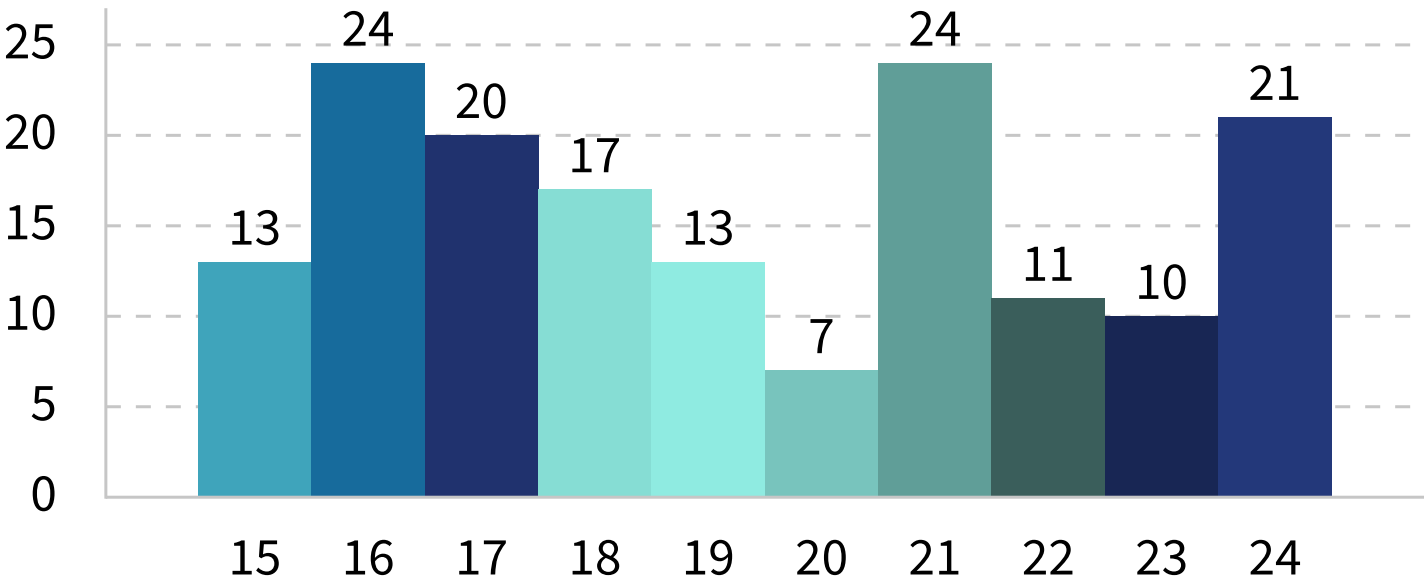
Men



Men (88)

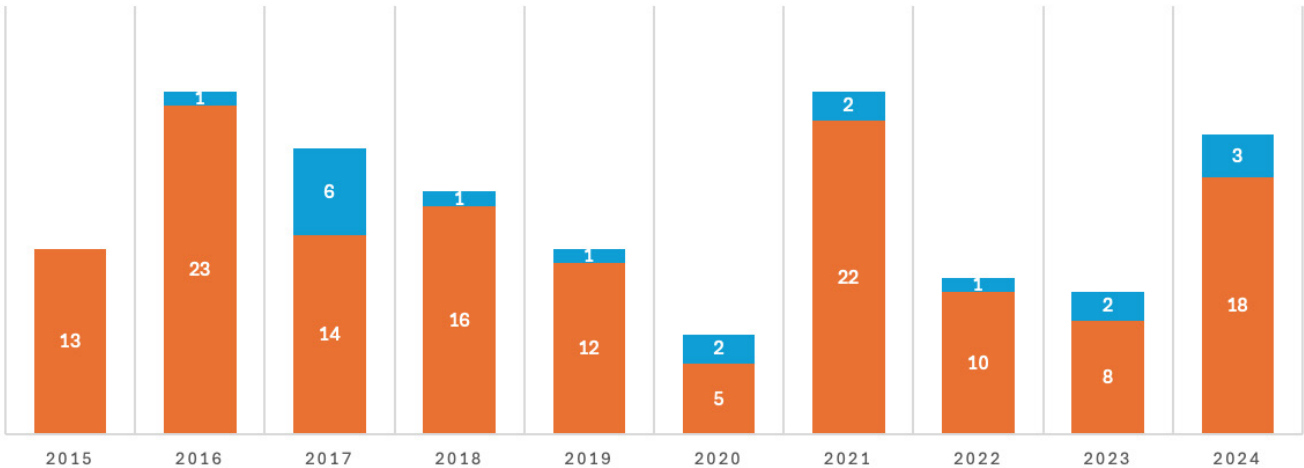
Women (12)

of ADs Hired by Year



Athletic Director Hires by Gender & Year

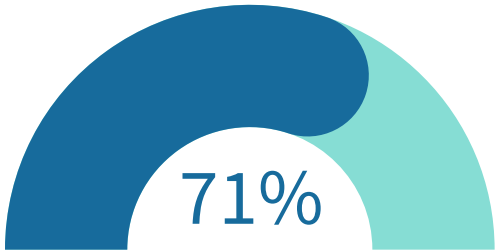
Men Women



Athletic Director Hiring Trends

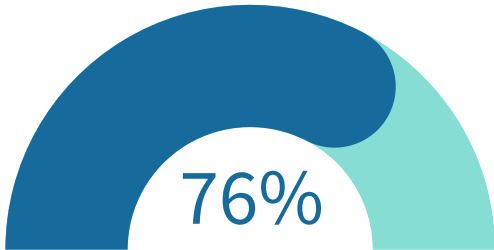
Pre & Post Name, Image & Likeness

	Avg. # AD Hires 2015-2020	Avg. # AD Hires 2021-2024	% Change
OVERALL	16	17	+7%
Men	14	15	+7%
Women	2	2	+0%
Search Firm	11	13	+18%
No Firm	5	4	-20%



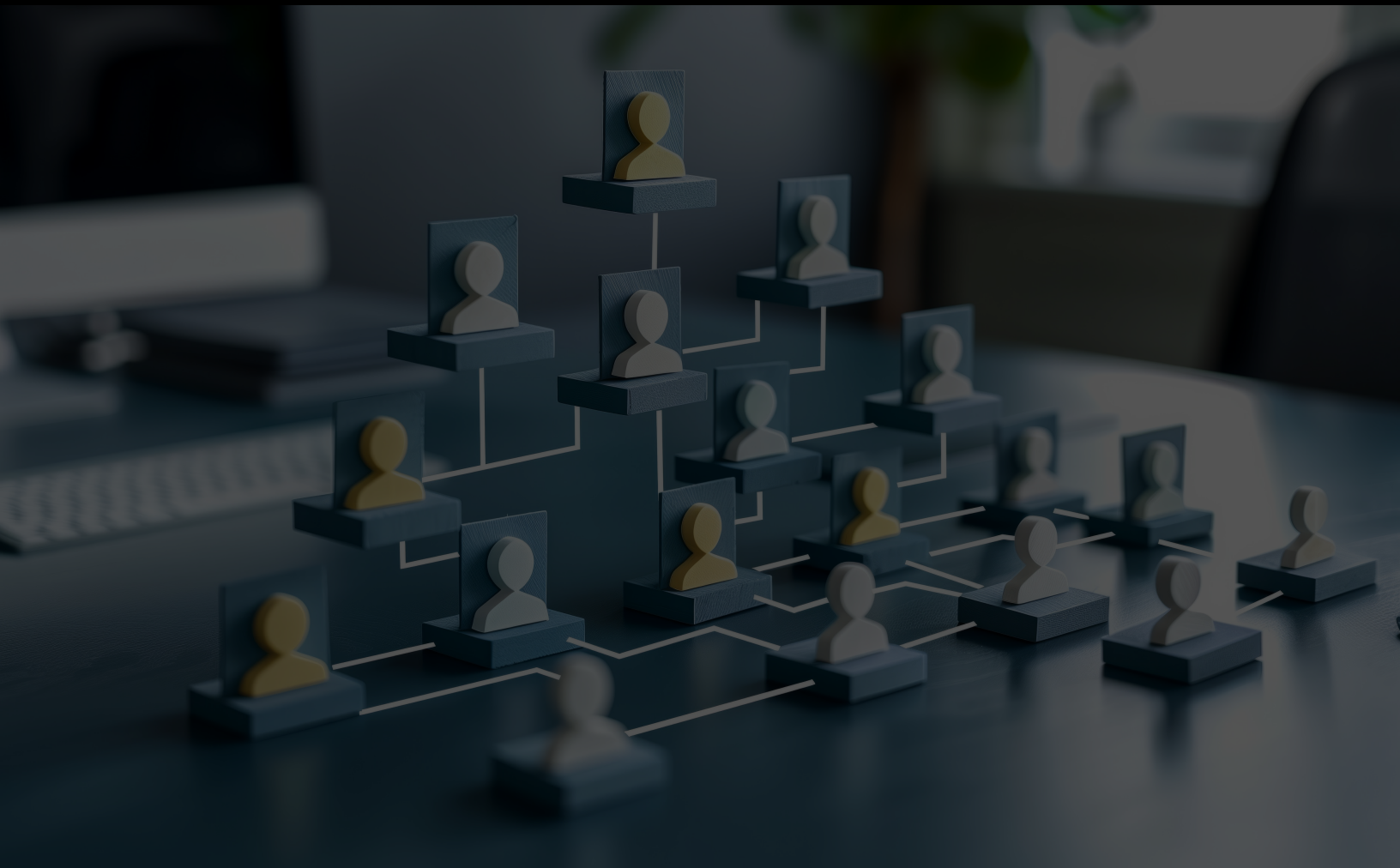
Pre-NIL
2015-2020

Use of
Search Firms



Post-NIL
2021-2024

18 **Football Championship Subdivision AggregatedOverview**



Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) Athletic Director Hiring Trends 2015-2024

Total # of ADs Hired

202

Across NCAA Division I
FCS Institutions

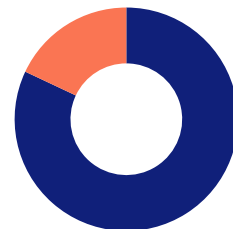


36

Women

166

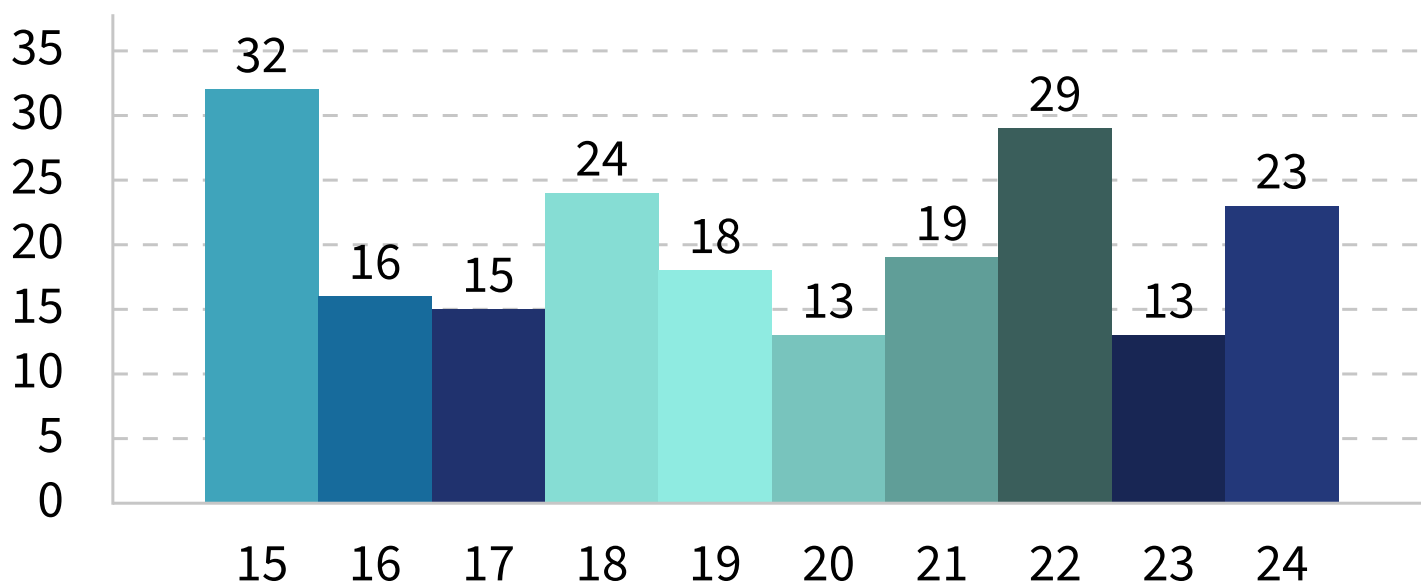
Men



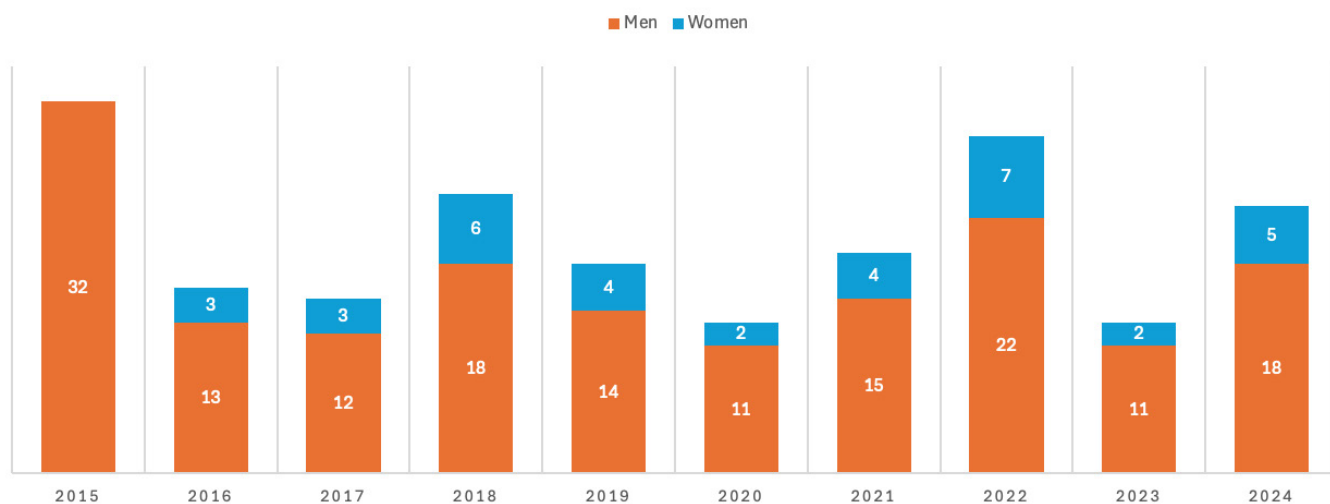
Men (82)

Women (18)

of ADs Hired by Year



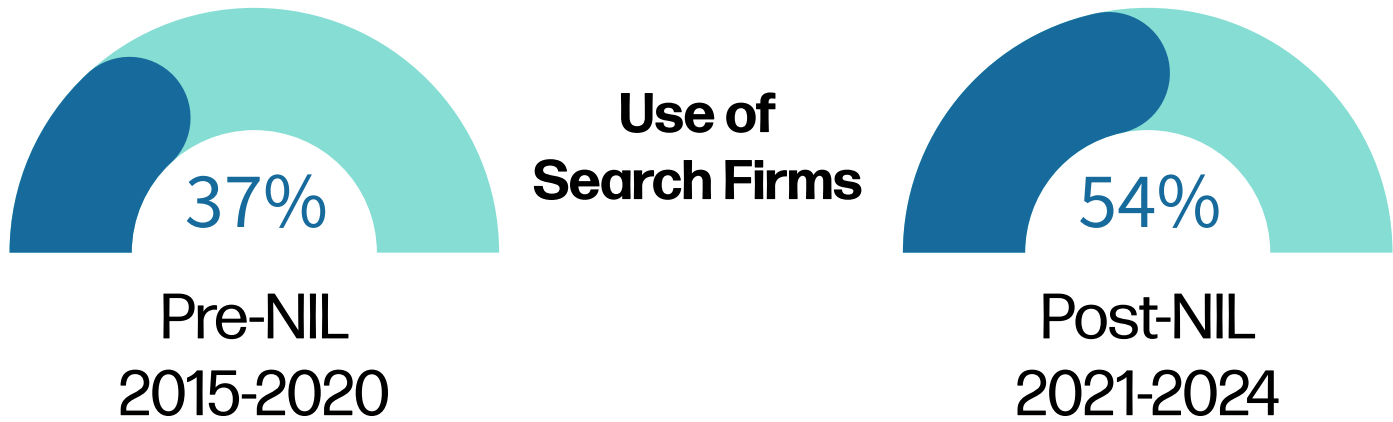
AD Hires by Gender & Year



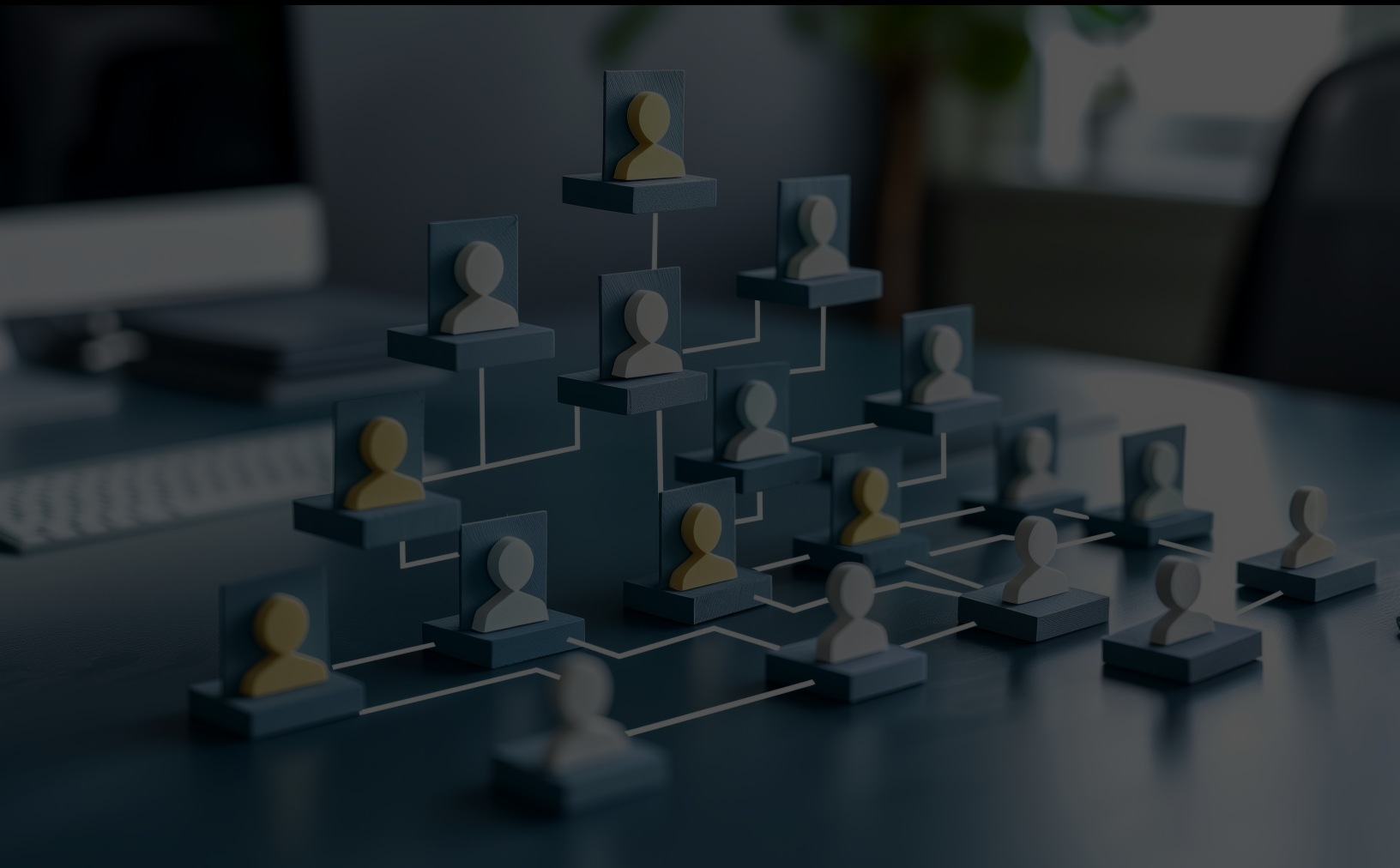
Athletic Director Hiring Trends

Pre & Post Name, Image & Likeness

	Avg. # AD Hires/ Year 2015-2020	Avg. # AD Hires/ Year 2021-2024	% Change
OVERALL	20	22	+10%
Men	17	17	+0%
Women	3	5	+66%
Search Firm	7	11	+57%
No Firm	12	10	-17%



21 **Non-Football Subdivision Aggregated Overview**



Non-Football Subdivision Athletic Director Hiring Trends 2015-2024

Total # of ADs Hired

109

Across NCAA Division I
Non-Football Institutions



23

Women

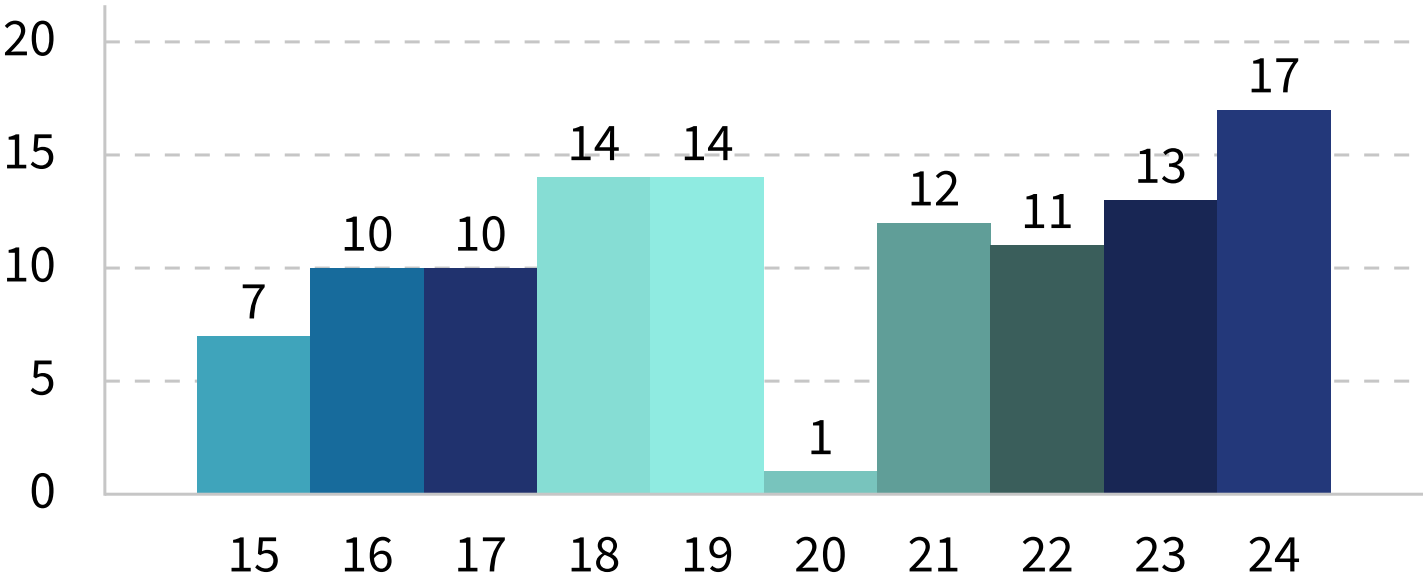
86

Men

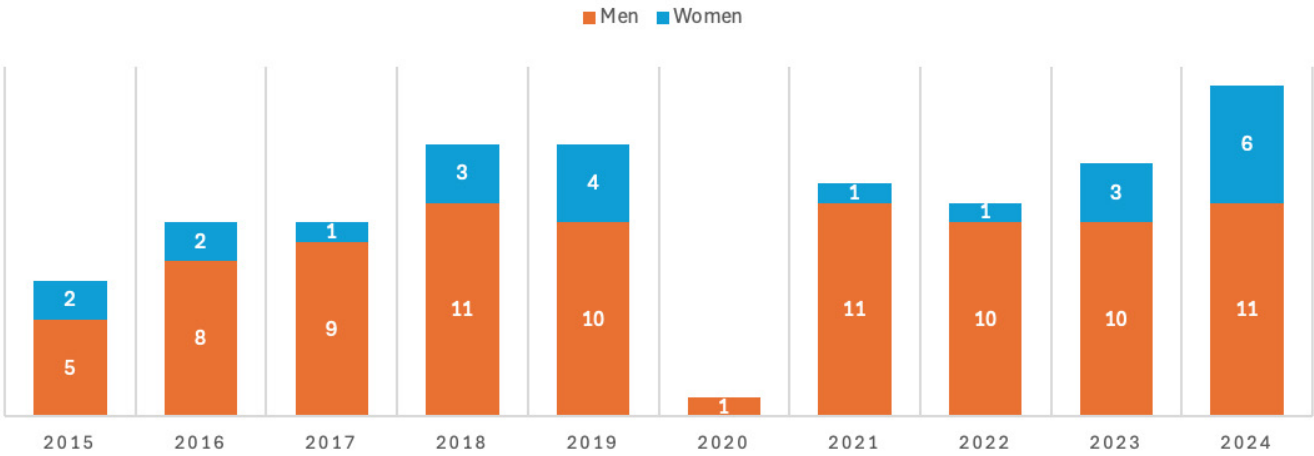


Men (79)
Women (21)

of ADs Hired by Year



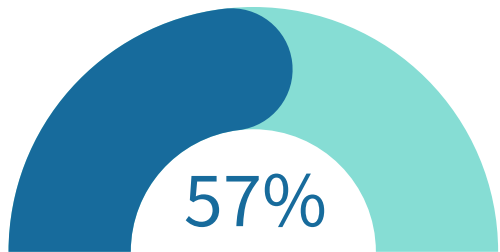
AD Hires by Gender & Year



Non-Football Athletic Director Hiring Trends

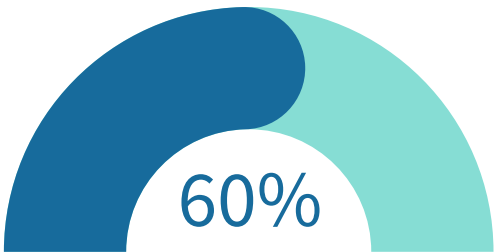
Pre & Post Name, Image & Likeness

	Avg. # AD Hires/ Year 2015-2020	Avg. # AD Hires/ Year 2021-2024	% Change
OVERALL	9	13	+44%
Men	7	11	+57%
Women	2	3	+50%
Search Firm	5	8	+60%
No Firm	4	5	+25%



Pre-NIL
2015-2020

Use of
Search Firms



Post-NIL
2021-2024

²⁴ Key Insights & Solutions



Key Insights & Solutions

The current data from *The Pipeline Project* indicate that there is more turnover in the athletic director position in the NIL-Era. Search firms are more involved in the process, women are being hired at record rates, and institutions are still more likely to hire external candidates than internal.

Athletic Administrators

◦ Action Steps

- **Understand the role of search firms:** Search firms specialize in identifying and recruiting highly-qualified candidates for senior and executive levels positions.
- **Answer the email/take the call:** If a search firm reaches out to you, have a conversation. Yes, dozens of other people might have received the same email, but you are on the list for a *reason*! Even if the position isn't of interest to you, take the time to talk about types of positions (and locations!) that might be better suited for you!
- **Ask questions** - Be a student of the search. Find out what a search firm thinks about YOU as a candidate.
- **Build your network:** Search firms have BROAD networks (in and OUT of college sport) and when you answer the email or take the call, you become a part that network. Remember, networking is about who you know... but it's also about who knows you!

Industry Professionals

◦ Action Steps

- **Educate your constituents:** Be open about the role and function of search firms - how they work, how and why they are used, and why it is important to engage in conversations with them.
- **Broaden YOUR network.** Search firms always ask "Is there anyone you might recommend for this position?" Undoubtedly you will be able to say "Yes!" and you are likely familiar the the names you will share. Consider how you are adding, innovating, and building your list of folks in AND out of the college sport industry.

PLEASE NOTE: This document contains hyperlinks to additional resources. Any text that is underlined is hyperlinked to a resource.

Key Insights & Solutions

Entry & Middle Level Professionals

◦ Action Steps

- **Ask mentors/leaders about hiring processes:** Be curious and open to learn. Take a growth mindset to learn about the hiring process. Ask to be on a hiring committee. Get involved in the hiring process on any level.
- **Do your research and observe:** Use resources like D1Ticker and Collegiate Sports Connect to understand the landscape and who is being hired for certain positions.
- **Build your network:** Yes, this means others in the profession, but also network with professionals in the search firm industry.

Prospective Employees

◦ Action Steps

- **Engage in conversation:** Continue to network and engage in conversation with industry professionals to understand how to navigate the hiring process.
- **Conduct informational interviews:** Use LinkedIn and other resources to make connections, but don't stop there. Set-up informational interviews to learn more about roles and people. Remember, networking is about who you know... but it's also about who knows you!

Education & Research

◦ Action Steps

- **Identify other industry hiring trends:** Engage in research that accounts for how other sport industries are hiring diverse candidates.
- **Create new industry partnerships:** Find ways to utilize existing resources to understand the hiring trends of other organizations and sport industries.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *The Pipeline Project*?

The purpose of *The Pipeline Project* is to capture the dynamic job positions and management structures of NCAA Division I athletic departments and conferences. More specifically, *The Pipeline Project* illustrates how men and women are represented in various positions and athletic department management and leadership structures. This data does not include coaches or coaching staffs.

Why is *The Pipeline Project* important?

For more than 5 decades, sport management scholars and practitioners have expressed concern that women and racial and sexual minorities may have less access and opportunity to progress through athletic department structures to decision-making positions; therefore, *The Pipeline Project* serves as a resource to identify "leaks" in talent pipelines both in job areas (e.g., compliance, marketing) and managerial tiers (i.e., entry, middle, and executive). This report focuses only on gender (see also Acknowledgements, page 28)

Who is the audience for *The Pipeline Project*?

The Pipeline Project is designed to serve as a resource for intercollegiate athletic administrators, professional organizations that serve intercollegiate athletic personnel, and current and future sports managers to help them understand job positions, employment trends, and the overall state of gender diversity within job positions and leadership structures. Academicians across disciplines are also encouraged to use this data to build research projects and long-term research agendas.

How was data for *The Pipeline Project* collected?

The research team pulled data from athletic department directories for each university in the Power Four [Big Ten, Big 12, Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Southeastern Conference (SEC)] and Group of Five [American Athletic Conference (AAC), Conference USA (CUSA), Mid-American Conference (MAC),

Mountain West Conference (MWC), Sun Belt Conference (SBC)] between May and June 2024. Data included names, titles, and departments. In anticipation of the upcoming conference realignment, the research team updated the conferences the universities are expected to represent for the academic year 2024-2025.

What does this report include?

This report looks at the hiring trends of NCAA Division I institutions from 2015 to 2024. It does not include data on coaches or coaching staffs. Moreover, this report includes data on gender, but does not yet include data on race and ethnicity. The research team hopes to include this information in future reports.

How were career stages defined?

Ott and Beaumont (2020) originally categorized titles of athletic staff as entry-level, mid-level tier II, mid-level tier I, and executive. The research team slightly modified the executive tier to acknowledge additional administrative decision-makers beyond the athletic director. See page 7 for more detailed information.

How did the research team account for gender?

Please refer to the "Acknowledgements" section on page 28. Gender was triangulated from multiple sources including online biographical data, news sources, and press releases.

How do I cite this paper?

Hancock, M.G., Kopka, N., & Green, E.R. (2025). *The Pipeline Project: 10-Year Athletic Director Hiring Trends, NCAA Division I, 2015-2024* [white paper]. University of Louisville.

For inquiries, please contact Meg Hancock (meg.hancock@louisville.edu).

Dedication

The Pipeline Project is dedicated to the pioneering individuals and relentless advocates who have fought for gender equality in intercollegiate athletics. While there is still work to be done, their courage, perseverance, and unwavering commitment have paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable landscape in sports. Their efforts have not only transformed opportunities for women/femme athletes but have also inspired a generation to continue the work toward equality and justice. We honor their legacy and are grateful for their invaluable contributions to intercollegiate athletics.

A special thanks to scholars past and present who have examined the experiences of intercollegiate employees, especially those in minoritized populations.

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Data Collection. Data for *The Pipeline Project* was mined from an existing database in January 2025. Data was analyzed based on the goals of the study.

Gender. The research team acknowledges that data presented in *The Pipeline Project* predominantly reflects the binary understanding of gender (man/woman). This is a result of the data sources available. However, the research team of *The Pipeline Project* recognize that gender is a complex and fluid construct that extends beyond binary categories. Gender fluidity, non-binary identities, and other gender experiences are valid and significant aspects of the broader gender spectrum.

While this report may not fully encompass all aspects of gender diversity, we are committed to acknowledging and valuing the range of gender identities and experiences of staff members and administrators in intercollegiate athletics. You matter and you count. If you would like to share your gender identity for inclusion in this report and in conjunction with your respective institution, conference, and/or aggregated data, please contact Meg Hancock (meg.hancock@louisville.edu).

Race and ethnicity. The research team acknowledges *The Pipeline Project* does not include data on race or ethnicity. We recognize this is a short-coming of this inaugural report. Future data collection and analyses will aim to incorporate a more inclusive perspective on race and ethnicity, as there is data to suggest people with multiple minoritized identities may encounter more barriers to accessing and moving through the pipeline.

Footnotes

(1) NCAA. (2024). NCAA Demographics Database.

(3) See reference list: Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Grappendorf et al., 2004.

(4) See reference list: Dickman et al., 2021; Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Grappendorf et al., 2004; Wood et al., 2019)

(5) See reference list: Acosta & Carpernter, 2011; Burton, 2015; Hoffman, 2011; Lapchick, 2023

(6) See reference list: Burton, 2015; Burton et al., 2009; Burton et al., 2011; Darwin et al., 2021; Dixon et al., 2007; Hancock & Hums, 215, 2016; Hardin et al., 2022; Keaton, 2022; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor et al, 2024; Taylor et al., 2017; Taylor & Wells 2017

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