

It's Just Different

By Laurie Bollig, CoSIDA Director of Membership Engagement



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While we continue to compile CoSIDA membership demographics, one thing is anecdotally evident — men outnumber women by a large margin. We can talk about

leveling the playing field, downplay stereotypes and strive for diversity and inclusion, but the bottom line is this — women working in athletic communications have different professional experiences than men. Women of color face different challenges than white women. Single women have as many struggles with work-life balance as married women. And moms? Well, let's just say they trade one full-time job for another when they go home for the night.

Recently, several CoSIDA members took time to explain some of the unique challenges of being a woman in athletic communications and how they approach their jobs as professionals.

It's My Job, Stupid

The plates of all who work in sports information are full. Lots of things to get done. Lots of hours. Joy Ekema-Agbaw, assistant director, marketing and communications at Arkansas, wears two hats in her department and the workload almost drove her to the ledge.

“Updating more than 100 extremely dated bios, constant releases, a never-ending media guide, miscellaneous additional write-ups, scripts, reads, radio, media advisories, scheduling video/poster shoots, double previews/recaps (two teams equal two of everything) — I wanted so badly to be not just be able to do it all, but do it all WELL,” noted Ekema-Agbaw.

“I couldn't see what I was accomplishing because I was too focused on the list of things I hadn't done, but thankfully my supervisors one-by-one lifted me out of the self-defeating depths of my mind.

“My workload remains more communications-oriented (especially during the fall), but my better understanding of my responsibilities allows me to better allocate time split between departments.”

Panic set in anytime Mara Rudolph thought about the ask she was about to make of her men's basketball coach. As an assistant director for athletics communications at California, Rudolph needed locker room access.

“I finally got the guts to ask coach a few days before the season started.

“Coach, how would you feel about me coming into the locker room for postgame? I want to do my job to the best of my ability, but I don't want to make our guys uncomfortable,” I stuttered (probably).

“He stopped me right there.

“It's not about whether you make them

uncomfortable. It's about if THEY make YOU uncomfortable,” Coach said. ‘If they cross the line, I want to know about it.’

“That was it. It was a two-minute conversation, maybe. No motives questioned. No special instructions. From then on, I was there for every post-game speech, every celebration and every team ‘come to Jesus’ moment. Not once did any person in the locker room question why I was there. Not once did anyone act immaturely or crudely toward me. I'd walk in with everyone else, listen in with everyone else, make a quick announcement about who had media obligations, and then I'd wait a few feet away for the guys I needed to bring to media. The same thing every male men's basketball contact in the country does.”

Morgan Romans is lucky. The men she works with as assistant director for communications at Eastern Kentucky are extremely supportive of her as a woman in the field. It's women who don't support women that confound Romans.

“In a field where women are the underrepresented gender, one would think that we would band together and support each other, but that just is not how it works all the time.

“If you don't want people to question your intentions or make you prove yourself, don't do it to someone else. It's tough for women in sports already. We don't need to make it tougher on each other. Instead, let's be each other's biggest



Left: Amie Canfield (left) and her father, Al Canfield (right), taking in a New York Giants game in November. Right: Maggie Hayon with her parents at her first road men's basketball game as a SID — UMES at Marquette (November 2009).



Left: Jessica Poole asking a question at the 2017 Diversity and Inclusion panel. Middle: Rachel Roche and daughter, Kenzie, at a softball game in 2010. She was about 20 months old. Right: Mara Rudolph (right, holding sign), men's basketball SID at Cal, found support from her coach when asking for locker room access so she could do her job to the best of her ability.



support system, be someone other women feel that they can confide in, cultivate kindness and raise each other up.”

You're Not Married Yet?

It took chest pains and recurring headaches for Mount Holyoke assistant director of athletics Amie Canfield to realize that the life she was living was exactly right for her.

“Through my 37 years, I think one of the biggest challenges facing women in this profession, or any profession really, are the expectations that the generations before us went through.

“Expectations like going to college, finding yourself, settling down, getting married, having kids. For me, I think it's been something that has plagued me for a long time. I'm currently still the ‘single one’ in my family with all five of my step siblings being married and having kids. Once I slipped past the 35-year mark, I began to wonder if there was something wrong with me since I didn't seem to fit the mold of anyone in my family.

“Simple, I know, but in our profession, there are a lot of demands. But there are also choices. It's taken me a long time to realize that being dedicated to my career, finding happiness on my own and having an amazing family and group of friends is what I truly want for myself.”

Squad Goals

Everybody's got to have them — your tribe, your crew, the fam. Whatever you call them, they are as essential as water and oxygen.

If one of her teams was playing, Maggie Hayon's parents were likely to be in the stands. As assistant athletics communications director for Delaware, Hayon wasn't playing.

She was keeping score.

“They continued to be by my side through the unpaid internships and were the first to celebrate when I locked down that first ‘big girl’ job with a real salary and benefits (which my father celebrated the most). Even when these internships and jobs meant moving across the country. “If my team is in driving distance, Jim and Kris Hayon will be on the pass list. And that doesn't count the times when they'll travel to Delaware to catch whatever sport is in season at the time.”

Nobody Looks Like Me

Imagine being the only white person at the Baptist church service on Sundays. Flip the script and you know what Jess Poole, assistant director for communications at Vanderbilt, feels like every day.

“The lack of diversity in the athletic media relations field leaves a lot to be desired. Our profession is largely a white man's business and there are few women of color in the industry and even fewer working at the power five conferences.

“I have often found myself as the only and the first African-American woman at the institutions that I have worked. Through my first several years in the profession, I didn't think much of it. I took the ‘It is what it is’ approach but I started taking a closer look at it when I took a job at Dartmouth College.

It was there in Hanover, New Hampshire, that I made a commitment to pay it forward to young African-American women in the profession and wanting to get in the profession. I wanted to be able to provide a support system that I didn't always have as a young African-American woman in this industry.”

Get a Life

Everyone needs a hobby, right? Something to take their minds off the daily grind. Amanda Ghysel, senior assistant director of athletic communications at Hofstra, went back to her roots to find her outlet. She coaches a 12-year-old girls' hockey team.

“I've been able to see the players grow (we lost our first game, 6-0, and beat the same team, 11-2, three weeks later). I've gotten to see their love for the game — alongside their skills — develop, all while becoming a better leader, teacher and role model myself.”

Jenna Willhoit, assistant communications director at Dayton, has figured out how to say no when she needs a little “me time.”

“I am a single woman with no kids, no boyfriend, not even a pet. I can barely keep a green plant alive. And, like those moms and dads that have to learn how to say no, I need to learn how to say no. I need time for me.

“What I have been able to figure out is that I have to say YES to the things I care about. YES to the causes and groups and organizations I am proud to have my name associated with. But, I

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Furman athletics communication staff kids, including Julie Paré's teenagers, attend a Furman football game in the fall.

also have to figure out how to stay sane balancing my involvement on campus, in my community, with professional organizations and my actual job that we all know is no 9-5, Monday-Friday gig."

Rachel Vogel, assistant director of athletic communications for New Haven, thought her competitive career was over when her NCAA softball career ended.

"On May 10, 2015, my competitive softball career ended in the NCAA Division III Regional final in Cortland, New York. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in sport management from DeSales University one week later. I thought I would never be competitive in a sport again.

"Golf has reinvigorated my competitive nature, not only with myself, but with Casey (Schermick, her fiancé, and director of athletic media relations at LIU Post). He also works in athletic communications and therefore, we have similar and, at times, overwhelming work schedules. Golf has been our outlet to get away from work and have fun together. It has also given us opportunities to travel the world."

Married ... with Children

Julie Paré, assistant sports information director at Furman, works from home several days a week and relies on a few

must-haves to raise her two teenagers.

"First and foremost, organization is paramount. We live by the calendar at our house. Everything, both work and family related, must go on the calendar!"

"I truly wouldn't be able to do this job without my mom friends! When I travel with golf for days at a time in May, this group steps right in for me and gets my children everywhere they need to go, plus they text me about any important information that I may be missing from the school while I am gone.

"I have often worried that my children don't have parents with 'normal' jobs who are always home by dinner, but I'm discovering more and more that there is no 'normal' anymore and that all of our children will be just fine! I think my children take pride in my job, and I know they have fostered a true love of athletics and of Furman."

Nicole Betker thought she would pick up right where she left off after having a child. But the Saskatchewan SID had changed and she knew it.

"The great juggling act of the work-life balance as a sports information director has always been a challenge for me. I love my job. I do what is necessary to get the job done and that equated to success for me. I was a shining star on the rise in the

Canadian university athletics landscape. I was chairperson for numerous committees, I'd represented U SPORTS (then CIS) at the World University Games and had the respect of my colleagues across the country. In that moment, I wondered if all of that came because I never took off my SID hat. I was Huskie Athletics and Huskie Athletics became me. And that isn't right, whether you have a child or not.

"I felt I quickly adjusted, but, in reality, I had merely 'adjusted' back into my old lifestyle. Work quickly became my number one priority again. Every choice I made was because it was what was best for Huskie Athletics. I wanted to be the supermom and I didn't want anyone — my co-workers, colleagues across the country, the coaches or athletes — to think that I had changed because I had a son.

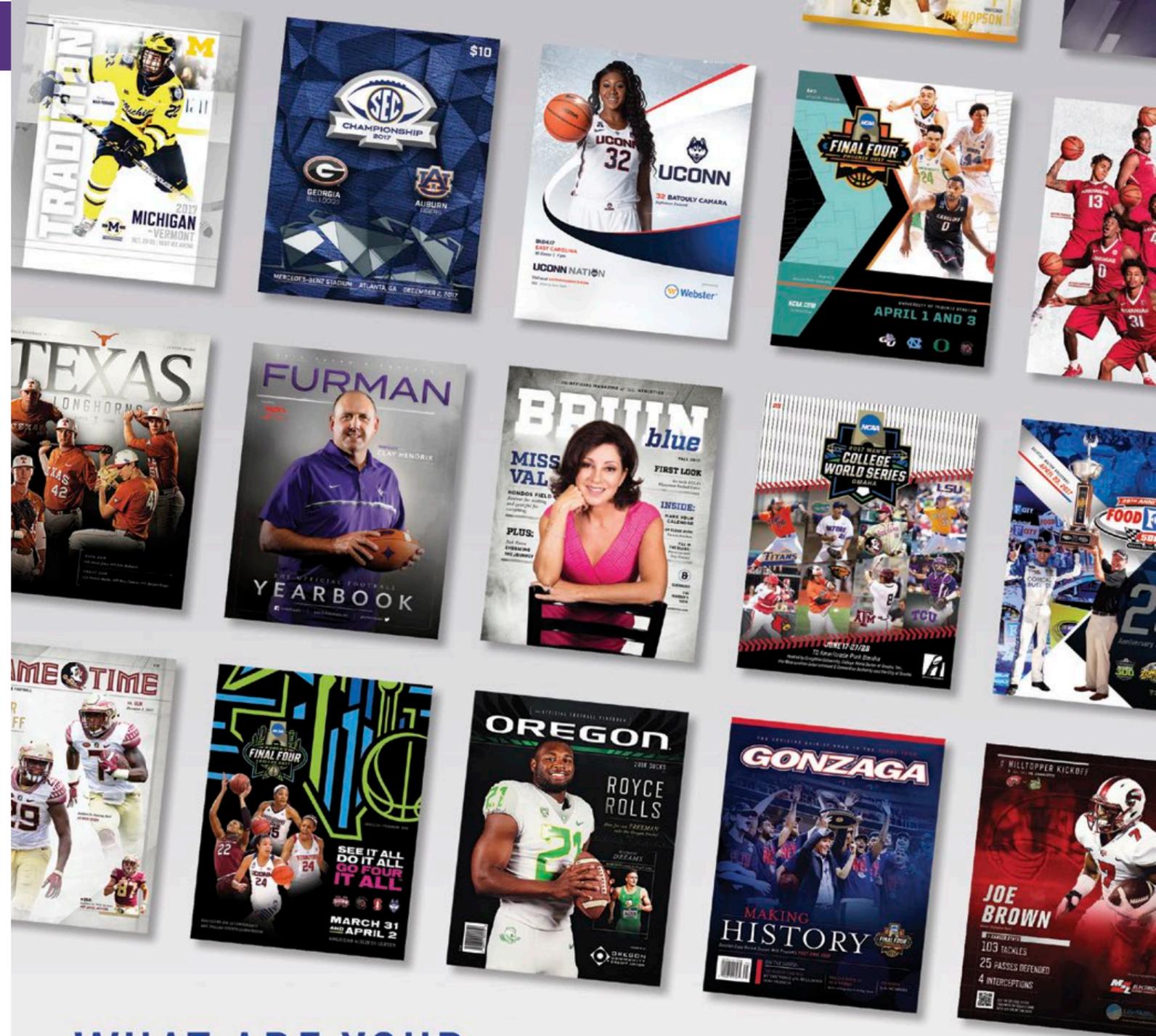
"But guess what. I had."

Starting a family was not a decision Rachel Roche took lightly. The assistant athletic director and senior woman administrator at Redlands did her research, took the plunge and now sees the benefits of teamwork in every aspect of her life.

"Sometimes being a mom and SID mix together, as my daughter has sat on my lap for the last inning or two of a softball game, checked off names at picture day and helped me set up before tip-off. My husband also steps in to do the shot clock while our daughter plays with other kids in the auxiliary gym. Is it perfect? Of course not, but we make it work. We are a good team.

"I hope my daughter sees me as a hard-working, successful and respected member of the athletics department. I hope she admires my love of sports and appreciates my standard of excellence. Maybe she'll find her passion in a sport and gain from the relationships, experiences and lessons that go along with it. But more importantly, I hope she understands the benefits of a team, not only in sports, but in life."

Interested in learning more about these 12 women and their experiences in the profession? Their submissions for this article can be seen in their entirety on CoSIDA.com.



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