

Legitimizing Intercollegiate Sport: A Case Study into the Type of Legitimacy of Men's U Sports Ice Hockey in Canada

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There are a number of organizations that exist within North America that are influential in impacting a male hockey player's pathway to making it to a professional level of competition (e.g., National Hockey League [NHL], American Hockey League [AHL], East Coast Hockey League [ECHL]). Some of these organizations include: National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Canadian Hockey League (CHL), and U Sports (formerly Canadian Interuniversity Sport [CIS]). Of these organizations that impact a player's pathway, Edwards and Washington (2015) identified that playing NCAA Division I or in the CHL were perceived as two equally legitimate pathways to playing professional hockey. The term legitimate is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Absent from the above pathway discussion, is a discussion around U Sports and its impact as a legitimate pathway to professional hockey career. As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore current and former men's hockey player's perceptions of U Sports as a means of gaining insight into how legitimacy of the league is managed as it pertains to a pathway to professional hockey.

Previously, U Sports hockey has been viewed negatively amongst junior hockey players (aged 16-21). A pivotal study conducted by Chard (2013) explained that U Sports is "perceived as a league for relative failures, confirming its status as an inferior brand. Perhaps this perception of inferior quality is related to the lack of promotion of the successes of [U Sport] athletes" (p. 336). While, Chard, Hyatt and Foster (2013) echoed this by stating "an argument can be made that despite the significance of the sport to its citizenry, almost the entire country ignores intercollegiate men's hockey" (p.246), which suggests that a fragmented perception of the legitimacy of U Sports men's hockey. Yet, between 2005 and 2016, there was 565 U Sports male hockey players that transitioned from intercollegiate to professional hockey, meaning that top male hockey players are attracted to play for universities. Suchman (1995) clarified this idea of perception by suggesting that legitimacy affects both how people act towards and interpret an organization. Therefore, the challenge U Sport's male hockey faces is legitimacy management. Since U Sports men's hockey is not a new league seeking to gain legitimacy, it will look to enhance its image as a legitimate pathway for hockey players.

To understand the opinions and perceptions of former and current U Sports players, organizational legitimacy was explored. Previous research on legitimacy in sport management has included: Edwards and Washington (2015); Kikulis and Slack (1995); Kikulis, Slack and Hinings (1995); Sam (2011); Slack and Hinings (1992); and, Washington, 2005. Organizations can achieve legitimacy through the perceptions of observers and stakeholders. As such, "Legitimacy emerges when organizational activities align with constituent expectations" (Lock, Filo, Kuntel & Skinner, 2015, p.362). Legitimacy is important in "obtaining legitimacy is important for sport organizations as it leads to the accrual of constituent support (e.g., participants, consumers, coaches, volunteers, parents)" (Lock et al., 2015, p. 362). Therefore, "cultural definitions determine how the organization is built, how it is run, and, simultaneously, how it is understood and evaluated" (Suchman, 1995, p. 576).

There are three different types of legitimacy: Pragmatic, Moral, and Cognitive legitimacy. Suchman, (1995) expressed "all three types involve a generalized perception or assumption that organizational activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 577). In addition, Suchman (1995) also expressed that "each type of legitimacy rests on a somewhat different behavioral dynamic" (p.577). The first type of organizational legitimacy is pragmatic. Pragmatic legitimacy "rests on the self-interested calculations of an organization's most immediate audiences" (Suchman, 1995, p. 577). The second type of organizational legitimacy is moral legitimacy, which "reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization and

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its activities” (Suchman, 1995, p. 577). The final type of is cognitive legitimacy, which “may involve either affirmative backing for an organization or mere acceptance of the organization as necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account” (Suchman, 1995, p.582). Based on the three types legitimacy, the following research questions were posed: 1) Based on current and former men’s U Sports hockey player’s perceptions; 2) What factors can be used to determine legitimacy in the U Sport pathway?; 3) How can those factors be categorized within the context of organizational legitimacy?; and, 4) Are these categories important for men’s U Sports hockey?

A single case study design was taken by using qualitative research methods, by conducting 12 in-depth semi structured interviews through the use of open ended questions with current and former players regarding the U Sports pathway. Single instrumental case study focuses on a question by selecting a bounded case to describe the topic being reviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The sample population was chosen based on those players who competed for the top four Universities over the past 10 years throughout Canada that have had student-athletes that have gone on to play professional hockey (e.g., AHL, NHL, ECHL, and European professional leagues): University of New Brunswick (n=32), University of Alberta (n=30), University of Manitoba (n=30), and St. Francis Xavier (n=32). Secondary data through the use of social media (i.e., Facebook, and Twitter) and website news articles of U Sports hockey was also collected and examined using content analysis to gain an understanding how U Sports, the geographic sub-leagues of U Sports, and the individual institutions themselves produce stories about the transition of male hockey players to professional leagues. Data analysis for this study consisted of a three-step process, which is a modified version of Miles and Huberman (1994) five-step process: 1) Formalization; 2) Thematic Framework, Coding, Charting; and, 3) Interpreting.

The preliminary analysis revealed that 22 different themes that emerged. A second analysis occurred where the data was reduced to five themes: Reputation, Development, Education/Scholarship, Marketing, and U Sports. Based on the preliminary analysis, the type of legitimacy that has emerged is pragmatic legitimacy. This is similar to the findings of Edwards and Washington (2015). Bitektine (2011) suggested that “pragmatic legitimacy is determined through the overall value that is assessed by an evaluator [or in the case of this study: former and current players]” (Edwards & Washington, 2015, p.215). While Suchman (1995) indicated that in order to achieve pragmatic legitimacy, “an organization must either meet the substantive needs of various audiences or offer decision-making access, or both” (p. 578). By identifying the type of legitimacy as being pragmatic, there is an understanding that U Sports is managing their legitimacy by the five themes identified in the secondary analysis. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that legitimacy is being managed by establishing U Sports male hockey as a pathway to a professional level of competition through the individual universities as opposed to the governing body. This is important to recognize as the success of recruitment for the most talented male hockey players is seemingly not as significant at the U Sports level, but rather at the university level where they can promote those players who have transitioned to professional levels of competition. This research is significant in gaining an understanding of how managing legitimacy can be an effective means in recruitment, developing elite level sport programs that draw a connection between amateur and professional sport, and finally, it allows for U Sports to compete with the NCAA Division I for the most talented athletes.