The Emergence of Diversity and Inclusion Officers in Intercollegiate Athletic Departments: A Conceptual Model

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Since 2013, Division I intercollegiate athletic departments have adopted inaugural collegiate sport administrators to hold positions focused on diversity and inclusion (Newton, 2019). Such positions mirror individuals holding the position of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) in the fields of business and higher education (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Given that intercollegiate athletic departments operate as quasi-separate business entities of universities (Sack 2009; Van Rheenen, 2013), the emerging trend of diversity and inclusion officers is likely to see more adoption in athletic departments, as such positions are common in universities and business organizations. Thus, the role of Diversity and Inclusion Officers (D&IOs) in intercollegiate athletics is in the state of early adoption at the Division I level (Newton, 2019). The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual model that considers why intercollegiate athletic departments are beginning to adopt D&IO positions and why more of these positions may continue to be adopted in the future.

The adoption of D&IO positions is worthy of examination, given collegiate sport continues to experience issues of racial (Adair et al., 2010; Lapchick, 2018) and gender inequity (Burton, 2015, McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017) in collegiate sport leadership positions. Cunningham (2009) examined diversity and inclusion efforts in a singular Division I athletic department and uncovered the difficulties this department encountered as their diversity efforts were viewed as symbolic as opposed to substantive. This conceptual model does not address the commitment to D&IO adoption by intercollegiate athletic departments, but attempts to explain why such positions are emerging at this juncture of collegiate sport, why this emergent trend can become a staple in collegiate athletic departments, and Lastly the model proposes future propositions to consider when studying D&IO adoption.

Using a multi-level framework the model examines emerging D&IO adoption by considering: a) socio-cultural and socio-political movements (#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter), as well as collegiate sport incidents (collegiate sport protests and publicized unethical practices) occurring on the backdrop of emergent D&IO adoption, b) the significance of sport management literature capturing the experiences of sport organizational actors that substantiate the pervasiveness of issues of gender inequity (#MeToo), racial inequity (#BLM), and unethical practices in collegiate sport (Varsity Blues Scandal, death of Jordan McNair). Further, propositions are presented for future empirical work studying D&IO adoption. Future empirical research should examine D&IOs at a field-level analysis (Cunningham, 2009) to understand: a) competing institutional logics (Reay & Hinings, 2008), b) the organizational culture of athletic departments adopting D&IOs (Hatch, 1993), c) unique identity characteristics of D&IOs (Viale & Suddaby, 2009), and lastly, d) institutional work and how D&IOs implement initiatives of diversity and inclusion (Lawrence, Suddaby, Leca, 2011).

As a scholarly community, we must interrogate the adoption, navigation, and legitimization of D&IOs in intercollegiate athletic departments to ensure such adoptions serve as a long-term substantive adoption, as opposed to a short-term symbolic gesture.