Leadership Diversity and COVID-19 Risk Management in NCAA Division I Football

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Due to health and safety implications, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need for risk management by sports organizations. Some professional sport leagues have shut down activities completely to mitigate risk (e.g., National Lacrosse League), while others have continued to play by either aggressively managing risk (e.g., the National Basketball Association with isolated “bubbles”) or by taking more relaxed approaches (e.g., Major League Baseball). At the collegiate level, governing bodies within the NCAA are under scrutiny about their decisions whether to play, postpone, or cancel the 2020-21 college football season. While the return-to-play decision is a risk management decision that impacts the health and safety of multiple stakeholders including players, college staff, and surrounding community members, the sociocultural and financial importance of college football has made the decision divisive nationwide. For instance, the Big Ten conference received significant blowback after announcing the cancellation of their season. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors that influence the risk management processes related to COVID-19 for NCCA athletic departments and conferences.

Contextual factors, including the sociocultural environment and demographic composition (i.e. diversity) of decision-making groups, influence decision outcomes. For example, the dominance of a school’s football program and their state’s political environment were predictors of the decision to either return for in-person or online classes among American colleges (Forde, 2020). Moreover, increased corporate diversity has been shown to decrease financial risk-taking behaviour (Bernile et al., 2018). However, the relationship between the sociocultural environment, diversity, and risk-taking is under explored in sport organizations. Therefore, we pose the following research question: What is the role of diversity in risk management decisions of a sport organization? We hypothesize that organizations with more sociocultural and demographic diversity will display more risk-averse behaviour pertaining to COVID-19, with the decision to return-to-play ultimately being a risk management decision.

To assess decision-making factors related to diversity and risk, data on Division I football teams were collected from official NCAA websites, public health records, state and county voting records, conference and athletic department press releases, and the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport. Our database includes diversity information at both the team and conference levels as well as various school and community factors such as local COVID-19 transmission rates, institutional financial information, municipal and state level political representation, and previous risk management decisions. Regression analyses will be used to assess the relationship between these variables and the administrative decisions to return-to-play.

This research will help advance theoretical understanding between diversity and risk management, as the two have yet to be explored simultaneously within an organizational sports setting. Moreover, the implications extend to organizational risk management more generally, as organizations must make similar health and safety considerations around COVID-19. This study uses publicly available data to investigate diversity and risk-taking in sport organizations and the results will help identify factors that could inform future decision-making in sports leagues, advise on the factors that improve risk management, and help identify future areas of study for the empirical investigation of risk decision-making.