

Creating and Sustaining a Diverse and Inclusive Workplace in College Athletics

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Diversity continues to be an important topic for managers of sport organizations. This interest stems from a variety of sources, including changing demographics of the workplace, increased social pressures for creating a diverse and inclusive workplace, legal mandates (e.g., Title IX, Title VII), and the promise of diversity-related workplace benefits (Cunningham & Fink, 2006). Not surprisingly, a number of sport organizations have begun to implement various diversity initiatives. In fact, the NCAA and every major North American professional sport organization has at least some initiative in place aimed at either improving the culture of diversity within that particular context or increasing the representation of members of traditionally underrepresented groups (for an overview, see Cunningham, 2007). In this spirit, several organizational scholars have proposed diversity management frameworks aimed at demonstrating diversity's potential for the workplace. DeSensi (1995) emphasized the need for a multicultural organization where diversity is valued, varied perspectives are sought, and a diverse team holds positions of power. Similarly, Doherty and Chelladurai (1999) theorized that organizations are best served when there is a multicultural workforce accompanied by a culture of diversity, with a respect for differences, tolerance for risk and ambiguity, open lines of communication, and open group membership. From a different perspective, Fink and Pastore (1999) described different diversity strategies an organization could adopt, with a proactive strategy being viewed as the most desirable, and their later work provided empirical support for these predictions (Fink et al., 2001, 2003).

Interestingly, while there are a number of theoretical contributions outlining the strategies to which sport organizations should adhere, there is little work examining how organizations achieve this end. That is, the process of creating a diverse and inclusive workplace has largely gone unexplored (for a notable theoretical exception, see Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

The purpose of our study, then, was to address this shortcoming in the literature, and more specifically, to understand the mechanisms and underlying processes by which sport organizations came to create a workplace of diversity and inclusion. To achieve this end, we focused specifically on five NCAA athletic departments that had previously been recognized for their diversity efforts. The institutions were located in varied regions of the United States (California, Colorado, Ohio, Florida, and Pennsylvania), and therefore, we were not limited by regional biases.

We adopted a qualitative, case study methodology to address our primary objectives. Specifically, we conducted face-to-face interviews with 70 persons, including chancellors, provosts, admissions officers, faculty, athletic directors, athletic administrators, coaches, players, and other university and athletic department representatives. Other materials were also collected, including copies of university policies and procedures, athletic department strategic plans, and various website materials. All of the data were analyzed through a reflective, bottom-up process, such that specific instances, processes, and cases were aggregated into more general themes. We report the content of those themes and provide specific examples below.

We identified 10 themes reflective of how athletic departments were able to create and sustain a diverse and inclusive workplace. The first two themes were seen as building blocks for the remaining processes. First, participants indicated that employees must value diversity-this is most critical to creating and sustaining a workplace of diversity and inclusion. Second, athletic departments in our research also pointed to the importance of conducting an institutional analysis, whereby managers investigated diversity and inclusion in all areas of the organization, including the taken-for-granted values and deeply embedded institutional activities. Third, athletes, coaches, administrators, and other athletic department staff emphasized how diversity training sessions allowed them to gain a greater understanding of and appreciation for how people who are different from them experience work and interact with others.

Fourth, to truly realize the benefits of diversity, the diversity initiatives should be fully integrated throughout the entire athletic department. In such cases, diversity and inclusion are seen as contributing to the success of all departmental activities-from human resource functions, to the approaches taken in marketing the sports, to the development activities, and everything in between. Fifth, participants in our interviews forcefully argued that administrators should not only focus on hiring persons from underrepresented groups into the areas of academic services, life skills, and compliance, but also into areas such as development, marketing, and finance because these are typically the areas that set employees on the career track to becoming senior administrators in athletics. Sixth, a number of people in our research, both within and outside the athletic department, spoke to the importance of the athletic department, its members, and the activities being fully integrated into the fabric of the university. As a department on campus that has high visibility and great influence, athletics could be used as a vehicle not only to educate

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and develop the students who participate in varsity sports, but also the student body as a whole. Seventh, the importance of mentoring to the career development of women, racial minorities, and other marginalized or underrepresented groups in intercollegiate athletics was discussed by many of the athletic department stakeholders we interviewed. Support for these various kinds of mentor/protégé relationships are important considerations for senior administrators who are concerned with creating a pipeline of talented, promising employees from diverse backgrounds who are capable of assuming positions of leadership within intercollegiate athletics. Eighth, the importance of honest and open communication concerning diversity in athletic departments was something that emerged from our interviews. In particular, one of the athletic directors was adamant about the need for him, as a leader, to be honest, open, and transparent about his perspectives and positions on diversity matters, as well as the need for him to encourage and allow his employees to do the same.

Ninth, leaders in our research demonstrated extreme enthusiasm for diversity and made inclusion a priority. By doing so, they modeled the attitudes and behaviors expected of others in the department as well. Finally, providing professional development opportunities for employees was identified as a very important human resource practice because it allowed the department to attract and retain employees from diverse backgrounds, and it could also help these employees to perform their duties and task more efficiently and effectively.

In moving beyond the theoretical frameworks that have dominated the literature to date, findings from our research provide an understanding of the processes and dynamics that underpin a diverse and inclusive workplace. Consequently, practitioners and researchers alike are provided with the steps necessary to begin to create and sustain diversity in the workplace.