University Prestige and Intercollegiate Athletics Recruiting: Economic and Administrative Factors of NCAA Institutional Control

Robert Clark, Texas A&M University  
John N. Singer (Advisor), Texas A&M University  
Paul Batista (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Ethics  
Abstract 2010-256  
June 5, 2010  
4:10 PM  
25-minute oral presentation  
(Sandhill Crane)

Intercollegiate athletics is at a crossroads where standards of higher education, big-time business costs and revenue, passionate fans and donors, and ethical practices of NCAA rules compliance collide. In many cases, the ideals from one facet may contradict the values of another. Instrumental to the success of an athletics program is the ability of a university to recruit highly gifted prospective student-athletes (Cunningham & Dixon, 2003; Chelladurai & Reemers, 1997). The financial impact of talented recruits may generate up to $1 million in annual revenues in men’s basketball (Brown, 1994) and $500,000 in football (Brown, 2001). As such, recruiting has become a measure of success for coaches (Cunningham & Dixon, 2002) and the “lifeblood of [an athletics] program” (O’Neil, 2008). Therefore, it is no surprise that recruiting advantage is foundational to the definition of an NCAA violation (NCAA Bylaw 19.02.2.1) and that violations of NCAA recruiting rules are the most prevalent form of NCAA infraction (Clark & Batista, 2009). Each NCAA institution is responsible to balance the financial interests and control the recruiting actions of its staff, coaches, boosters, and student-athletes. This is considered institutional control, which refers to the control that university administration has to prevent the violation of NCAA rules and regulations.

Institutional control is important because corruption in intercollegiate athletics can lead to financial, institutional, and academic harm that may jeopardize the reputation of a university and its constituents (Grimes & Chressanthis, 1994; Hughes & Shank, 2008; Kihl, Richardson, & Campisi, 2008). This study seeks to advance our understanding of institutional control over NCAA rules compliance programs and the economic climate that might challenge institutional control. This research goal is important because extant literature suggests that the NCAA functions as a classic economic cartel (Fleisher, Goff, & Tollison, 1992; Kahn, 2006; Grant, Leady, Zygmont, 2008; DeShriver & Stotlar, 1996) where member institutions seek to restrict competition and maximize profits (Kahn, 2006); however, only five percent of all Division I institutions were profitable from 2004 to 2008 (Kelderman, 2008). Therefore, the NCAA does not act as a true economic cartel, but rather functions under Bowen’s Cost Theory of Revenue (Bowen, 1980), where institutions of higher education seek to obtain prestige through generating revenues, all of which are expended to win NCAA championships.

This study utilizes an instrumental, qualitative case study design (see Stake, 2005) in order to investigate the economic and administrative factors of institutional control in a major NCAA affiliated university athletics program. Klein and Kozlowski (2000) advocate the use of multilevel theoretical analysis, which specifies the relationships that exist among various levels of an organization. With the intent to capture the full extent of the multilevel approaches, interviews were conducted with key figures at the top-down, bottom-up, and meso levels of a Bowl Championship Series (BCS) affiliated Division I (FBS) university located in the Southern region of the United States (i.e., BCS University), reported as the area with the most frequent major recruiting violations reported (Clark & Batista, 2009). These individuals included the university president, director of athletics, faculty athletic representative, director of athletic compliance, coaches from men’s basketball and football, and several boosters from the University. The results were analyzed using a grounded theory approach in order to inductively lead to explanations of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009).

Broadly speaking, findings from this study suggest the systemic pressure to win championships and maintain institutional control become difficult to balance with the added pressure of high stakes recruiting that can influence the financial stability of an athletic department. Four major themes emerged from the analysis of the data: issues of institutional prestige, the economic climate, the successful structure of institutional control, and enforcement of the NCAA rules. First, institutional prestige for the entire university may be manifested in the form of academic excellence, integrity, and community values, whereas athletic prestige is determined by the frequency of winning championships “the right way” (i.e., adherence to NCAA recruiting regulations). Second, given the symbiotic relationship between the broader university and the athletic department (i.e., athletics relies on the university for financial support and the university relies on athletics for institutional prestige), there is a need for institutional
control over athletics to prevent violations that could damage institutional prestige. Third, institutional control of the athletics program is correlated to the integrity and prestige of BCS University. A four-step process for establishing this institutional control emerged from the data. Fourth, the enforcement of NCAA rules must strike a delicate balance between institutional and individual sanctions. Finally, from these themes emerged six methods or strategies for institutions to curtail future violations specific to recruiting. The themes from this study will be further elucidated in the presentation.

In conclusion, the university mission of academic excellence and integrity collide with the systemic and economic pressures to win championships at BCS University. As such, the rewards of rules violations may bring the intended goal of obtaining institutional prestige through winning championships, but in the long-term, winning championships without violating recruiting rules may help the university obtain its goal of prestige. Although this study does not focus upon the generalizability of its findings to all NCAA member institutions, the implications may reach beyond the campus at BCS University to other similar NCAA member institutions. These findings offer a means by which future violations of recruiting rules may be reduced and it may also prevent employment termination of individuals or provide the blueprint to enhance the reputation of integrity for an institution of higher education.