Diversity Training in NCAA Division II Athletic Departments

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Diversity training represents the process whereby organizational employees acquire skills, knowledge, and abilities related to diversity (Cunningham, 2007). As of 2005, over two-thirds of all companies in the US provided such training programs (Esen, 2005). Despite its prevalence, the effects of diversity training are somewhat equivocal. Proponents argue that diversity training allows the organization to attract and retain employees, maintain worker morale, foster an understanding among groups, curb lawsuits, and contribute to organizational success (Bendick et al., 2001; Holladay et al., 2003; Kulik & Roberson, 2008; Rynes & Rosen, 1995; Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1999). On the other hand, opponents of diversity training argue that such programs force employees to discuss overly sensitive issues, are ways of “blaming” people in power, reinforce stereotypes, sensitizes employees to problems, and lack a strong association with organizational performance (Arai et al., 2001; Hemphill & Haines, 1997; Holladay et al., 2003; Kalev et al., 2006; Karp & Sammour, 2000).

This review suggests that the effects of diversity training are not well-understood. Furthermore, most of the diversity training research has been conducted outside the sport context, thereby creating an additional void in the literature. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine diversity training among NCAA Division II athletic departments. Specifically, I investigated the motivation for offering the training, the degree to which the training was linked with important departmental activities, and how these factors influenced training transfer (i.e., application of the knowledge, skills, and abilities to the workplace setting). Training transfer served as the primary dependent variable because training efforts are not likely to be successful unless employees actually apply the material in their work (Colquitt et al., 2001; Lim & Morris, 2006).

Effective training begins with a needs analysis, whereby leaders evaluate the organization, job/task, and individual employee to better understand where training is needed, who needs to be trained, and what material should be included (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). In short, the needs analysis serves to undergird the organization’s motivation for training. Bendick et al. (2001) identified the most commonly listed motivations for providing training, including the desire to increase productivity, improve customer relationships, comply with outside mandates, and enable better operations. In applying this work to the athletic setting, I examined five potential motivations for diversity training: increasing productivity, improving customer relationships, compliance with university mandates, compliance with NCAA mandates, and improving workplace dynamics (Research Objective 1).

In addition to understanding the motivation behind the training, it is also important to examine the degree to which diversity training is linked with other organizational activities. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that diversity initiatives are most effective when they are systemically integrated throughout the organization (Bendick et al., 1001; Wiethoff, 2004). For example, a recent field study from Cunningham (2009) revealed that diversity change efforts at a large university were ineffective, in part, because they were not enmeshed into other organizational practices. In drawing from this literature, I examined the degree to which the diversity training was connected with the department’s mission statement, strategic plan, hiring practices, and personnel evaluation (Research Objective 2).

To examine these objectives, I collected data from 641 senior athletic administrators from NCAA Division II athletic departments. Participants responded to questionnaire items designed for the study. They first indicated whether or not their department offered diversity training. Then, following Bendick et al. (2001), participants rated from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a great extent) the degree to which the training in the department was motivated by “increased productivity,” “improved customer relations,” “compliance with university mandates,” “compliance with NCAA mandates,” and “improved workplace dynamics.” In a separate section, respondents rate the degree to which the training was connected with the following initiatives: “mission statement,” “strategic plan,” “hiring practices,” and “personnel evaluation.” The items were rated using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a great extent). Finally, transfer of training was measured with two items (e.g., “people were expected to use the training in their everyday job”) measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ( = .85).

Because the research objectives are concerned with the department’s training, I first aggregated responses from the individual to the department level of analysis—a step supported by aggregation statistics. This brought the sample size from 641 administrators to 205 athletic departments. Frequency analysis indicated that 78 of the 205 departments (38%) offered diversity training.

I then conducted a principal components analysis (PCA) to explore the factor structure of the scales. Two factors emerged for training motivation: improve performance ( = .71) and comply with external mandates ( = .80). A single factor emerged for
the linking of the training with organizational activities ($\beta = .83$).

Finally, I tested the research objectives through hierarchical regression analysis. The controls (racial diversity of employees, gender diversity of employees, operating budget) accounted for 16% ($p < .01$) of the variance, with racial diversity of department employees holding a positive association with transfer. In the second step, the variables accounted for an additional 39% ($p < .001$) unique variance. Results indicate that offering training to improve performance ($\beta = .20, p < .05$) and linking training with other activities ($\beta = .56, p < .001$) were both positively associated with transfer of training. The motivation to offer training for compliance reasons was not related to transfer ($\beta = .02, p = .83$).

Results of the study indicate that most of the athletic departments in this study (62%) did not offer diversity training. This finding stands in contrast to the trend from organizations outside the sport context (Esen, 2005), where most organizations choose to offer such training. Departments that did offer training did so for two primary reasons: to improve the effectiveness of the workplace and to comply with external mandates. These results are consistent with Bendick et al.’s (2001) research and suggest that there are varying reasons for conducting diversity training in the workplace. Finally, employees were most likely to use the diversity training in the workplace when the training was (a) conducted to improve workplace effectiveness and (b) tied to other organizational activities, with the latter effects being particularly strong. Thus, for employees to use the training, managers should demonstrate how it impacts their work performance and link the training with the department’s mission, strategy, hiring practices, and personnel evaluations.