African American Male Athletic Directors’ Perspectives on Diversity: A Comparison of Two University Athletic Departments

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The topic of diversity, which Cunningham (2007) described as “the presence of differences among members of a social unit that lead to perceptions of such differences and that impact work outcomes” (p. 6), has been of great interest to sport management scholars (see Cunningham & Fink, 2006) and to leaders in the sport industry who are faced with the challenge of managing the incredible range of diversity they might encounter on a daily basis. Sport management scholars have proposed diversity management frameworks aimed at demonstrating diversity’s potential for the workplace (see DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999); and leaders in sport organizations have embraced initiatives aimed at improving the culture of diversity or increasing the representation of historically underrepresented groups in these organizations (for an overview, see Cunningham, 2007).

Cunningham (2007) suggested top management support for diversity is arguably the most important factor in determining whether or not the promise of diversity is realized in these sport organizations. Historically, leaders in sport organizations have been white, Protestant, able-bodied males (Fink, Pastore, & Reimer, 2001). More specifically, intercollegiate athletic departments at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE) in the United States (US) who are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) have been some of the most homogenous in terms of the compositional diversity in the upper echelons of its leadership (Brooks & Althouse, 2007; Lapchick, Little, Lerner, & Mathew, 2009). According to the 2008 Racial and Gender Report Card, NCAA member institutions and their conferences lost ground for both their record for gender and race hiring practices. In particular, college sport received failing grades for race in Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) head football coaching positions and Sports Information Directors, and race and gender in the key positions of athletic director, conference commissioner and FBS university president (see Lapchick et al, 2009).

Most of the aforementioned positions, particularly the athletic director, are at the top of the organizational chart where the major strategic decisions are made. Typically, the athletic director serves as the CEO of the athletic department and sets the tone for the direction of the organization and its mission, values, goals, and initiatives, including those related to diversity. Therefore, it becomes important to garner an understanding of this important decision maker’s perspectives on diversity and how they go about creating and sustaining a diverse workplace. Very little research has focused on how leaders in intercollegiate athletics think and go about creating and sustaining diversity in their organizations. Moreover, given the dearth of racial minority leaders in major athletic departments at PWIHE, it is especially important to study these particular leaders’ perspectives on this topic of diversity.

The purpose of this study was to address this gap in the sport management literature by assessing how African American athletic directors think about diversity, and incorporate it into the workplace. This study represents a portion of a larger study designed to assess the diversity best practices of NCAA member institutions that had previously been recognized for their diversity efforts. The focus here is on two NCAA member institutions that had hired African American males as the athletic director in recent years. These were two of only a very small number of racial minority athletic directors who occupy positions at NCAA Division 1, FBS schools.

The research design for this study was a multiple or collective qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005), which allowed the researchers to focus on two distinct cases (i.e., athletic departments) and make a comparison between the two (i.e., seek out similarities as well as differences). Background information (from the athletic department website) was gathered on each athletic director as a secondary data source; the primary data sources consisted of face-to-face, in-depth interviews with each athletic director, members of his senior leadership team (e.g., associate and assistant athletic directors), coaches, other departmental staff, and student-athletes. We asked each participant in the study questions related to how they define diversity, salient forms of diversity in the athletic department, some benefits and challenges associated with diversity in the department, and how diversity and inclusion were created and sustained in the department.

The data were analyzed utilizing an inductive, content analysis approach (Thomas, 2006). Findings from this study reveal a few things. First, it appears that each of these leaders takes on an affirmative action type approach to diversity management, particularly as it relates to identifying and hiring talented women and racial minorities in coaching and administrative positions. Second, each of these athletic directors is viewed (and see themselves) as role models, particularly for the racial minority student-athletes at their institutions. Third, each leader exhibited open, honest, and bold communication concerning diversity among the...
employees, and empowered them to do the same. Finally, one of the major differences between the two athletic departments was that the one with the largest operating budget, most employees, and greater number of varsity sport programs conducted a diversity audit to and made it mandatory for all employees (including the athletic director) to participate in diversity training. Most of the participants interviewed from this athletic department discussed the positive outcomes of this diversity training in which they participated.

In conclusion, this study allowed the researchers to move beyond the theoretical frameworks that outline strategies for what sport organizations should do in managing diversity, to an emphasis on how they are actually going about doing it. Further, the focus on athletic departments that are led by a racial minority athletic director allowed for a rare glimpse into the culture of diversity and diversity management practices at NCAA member institutions that have historically been adverse to diversity, particularly in senior level administrative and other leadership positions (e.g., head coaches). Implications for research and practice related to diversity in intercollegiate athletics will be discussed in this presentation.