Factors Affecting Retention: A Division II Perspective

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There can be severe organizational consequences of employee turnover including incurring costs associated with recruiting, screening and assimilating new talent, exit interviews, employment advertising, applicant testing, assessment, background checks, interviews, travel and relocation, and orientation and training (Frank et al., 2004; Walker, 2001). Indirect costs of turnover include loss of investments in talent development, loss of sales opportunities, strained customer relations, loss of productivity, delay in productivity during times of staff training and adjustment for new employees, erosion of customer service, low employee morale, and lower profitability (Frank et al., 2004; Gray, Niehoff, & Miller, 2000; Walker, 2001). However, the retention of employees can lead to service and organizational excellence, growth, and financial developments (Studer, 2004). Researchers agree that retention of employees leads to consistency, profitability, and greater overall success (Buckingham & Vosburgh, 2001; Cascio, 2006; Frank et al., 2004; Waldman & Arora, 2004).

Few studies have investigated the retention and turnover of employees in sport settings, and even fewer have been concerned specifically with intercollegiate athletics. The intercollegiate research that examined the phenomenon of retention was often segmented and sporadic. In particular, the empirical research conducted approached retention from a perspective in which the behaviors of coaches were examined based upon their race (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004a; Cunningham, Sagas & Ashley, 2001) or gender (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Inglis, Danylchuck, & Pastore, 2000; Sagas & Batista, 2001; Sagas, Cunningham, & Ashley, 2000).

Coaches are a significant resource for college athletics departments because they recruit student-athletes, develop their athletic abilities, and coordinate individual athletes into the development of teams (Turner & Chelladurai, 2005). Coaches are viewed as a critical component to developing winning programs, as well as a tradition of and reputation for athletic dominance. As retention of coaches is tied to consistent workflow, team performance, student-athlete morale, and financial costs, retention of coaches has become of critical importance to athletic administrators. It is more cost effective for an institution to retain a coach than replace one (Turner, 2001).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how career aspirations influenced the retention or turnover of assistant sport coaches at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II level. This study addressed career aspirations and how they related to retention of assistant coaches. Additionally, much of the prior research has been done at the NCAA Division I and Division III levels (see for example Turner and Chelladurai, 2005). This study investigated assistant coaches at the Division II level.

The epistemological perspective used in this study was that of constructionism. In specific reference to the topic of retention of NCAA Division II assistant coaches, it was prudent to acknowledge that every coaching experience was likely different; but with overarching themes that help explained the phenomena of turnover and retention. Interpretivism best explains the theoretical perspective from which this study was conducted. Interpretivism allowed the researcher to look for interpretations of the social life-world of Division II coaching based on culturally derived and historically situated interpretations.

Eight Division II assistant coaches participated in this study. The participants were purposively selected to maximize variation and obtain diverse perspective of the phenomenon of turnover of assistant coaches at this competition level. Participants were assistant coaches of women's volleyball, women's basketball, women's soccer, and football at NCAA Division II member schools in the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference (RMAC). Assistant coaches were examined in this study in order to look at a coaching population with relatively little professional experience compared to head coaches and presumably much of their coaching career ahead of them (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004a). Participant tenure in current positions ranged from four to nine years.

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: Importance of a Challenging Environment (Competitive Environment, Growth Opportunities); Fit – Philosophical Alignment (Environment of Division II, Importance of Support and Trust, Administrator Investment); Fit – Work-Life Balance. These three themes encompass what the participants stated to
be the reasons why they remain coaching at the Division II level and at their respective institutions. These themes are not the only factors that affected the retention of these coaches, but they were the most salient and pervasive factors across the sample.

The data indicated that assistant coaches did not have specific career goals that affected their decision to stay at their current institutions. Coaches were either unable to or chose not to disclose specific career goals. Rather, the coaches expressed the need for certain salient factors that affected their decision to stay at their current institution. These factors included a need for challenging environment, a desire to have a philosophical alignment with their institution and Division II, and a preference for a work-life balance over a more competitive athletic environment. The saliency of these characteristics provided for an overall work satisfaction for the assistant coaches, enough so that they did not feel compelled to leave their current positions. The coaches were able to indicate what factors were important in affecting their retention, but did not highlight the factors that could cause turnover in the cases of other coaches that were not interviewed. However, the conclusion could be drawn that a lack of the salient factors identified by the coaches could negatively affect retention.

Two interesting points of discussion remain and should be investigated further. First, assistant coaches frequently commented on the desire for greater financial resources with respect to their programs. While they mentioned a desire to earn more in personal compensation, no coach expressed feeling so strongly about pay that it would affect his/her desire to remain at their institution. Second, while the data did not reflect the emergence of a theme related to head coach turnover, it should be noted that all assistant coaches work in an environment in which the head coach was established before their arrival. To understand factors that affect assistant coach retention better, it may be helpful to explore in more detail the effect of the head coach.