Sexual Orientation Diversity in Intercollegiate Athletics

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals frequently face prejudice and discrimination in the workplace. Sexual minorities in the US do not receive federal employment protections, and fewer than half the states have laws prohibiting employment discrimination (Human Rights Commission, 2009); up to two-thirds of LGBT employees report sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace (Ragins, 2004); and only 26.7% fully disclose their sexual orientation to others at work (Ragins et al., 2007). Similar trends are observed in the sport context. Many parents (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009), former players (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007), and persons entering the sport profession (Gill et al., 2006) express sexual prejudice. Most sport leagues have policies restricting access for trans athletes (Buzuvis, 2012), and LGBT job applicants face access discrimination (Cunningham et al., 2010). Given the heterosexist norms, sexual minorities are frequently reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation to others, and they also face discrimination from others in the profession (Krane & Barber, 2005).

While heterosexist environments might be the norm in many sport organizations, there is evidence that (a) such dynamics are not representative of all such workplaces and (b) sexual orientation diversity frequently benefits the workplace. Illustrative of the first point, recent research suggests an increasing number of sport teams are supportive of LGBT players (Anderson, 2009; Fink et al., 2012), while approximately 10% of the athletic departments in Cunningham's (2010) study had high levels of sexual orientation diversity. With respect to the benefits of inclusiveness, research suggests that sexual orientation diversity, when coupled with an inclusive work environment, is associated with a creative workplace (Cunningham, 2011a) and objective measures of performance (Cunningham, 2011b). These findings are consistent with Cunningham and Melton’s (2011) theoretical framework, which suggests that sexual orientation diversity improves internal processes, enhances productivity, and advances relations with external stakeholders. Furthermore, from a self-verification theory perspective (Swann et al., 2004), people are likely to be more engaged in organizations where their identities are valued and respected by others.

Thus, while sexual orientation diversity is relatively scarce in the sport context, there is evidence that (a) LGBT inclusion is increasing in some sport contexts, and (b) sexual orientation diversity can be a source of competitive advantage for sport organizations, particularly when the organization has an inclusive culture. Despite this evidence and the theoretical arguments developed, there is little research examining how these sport organizations create diverse workplaces, or how such diversity impacts the workplace. This research addresses these shortcomings. Specifically, in focusing on intercollegiate athletics, the primary objective of this project is to understand the antecedents and effects of sexual orientation diversity within sport organizations. The research is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: How does an athletic department create a workplace with high sexual orientation diversity and an inclusive organizational culture?

RQ2: What are the outcomes (for the university, department, and departmental personnel) associated with sexual orientation diversity?

To examine these research questions, I conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis. As one element, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 administrators and coaches from two intercollegiate athletic departments. Both athletic departments had received recognition from outside organizations for their inclusive practices. The interviews lasted between 30-75 minutes and focused on the impetus for having sexual orientation diversity in the department, the benefits of such differences, potential drawbacks from having sexual orientation diversity, and recommendations for other departments. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Consistent with Lincoln and Guba (1985; see also Glense, 2006), I also kept a reflexive journal, documenting my experiences and reflections during the interview process. Finally, I also gathered data from other additional sources, including university documents (e.g., catalogs), outside articles (e.g., Sports Illustrated), and the athletic department...
websites.

Data analysis is currently taking place. I am following a constructivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005), whereby I will analyze and break down the raw data into codes based on the theoretical tenets (Cunningham & Melton, 2011; Swann et al., 2004) guiding the investigation. This is consistent with what Schwandt (2007) refers to a priori, content-specific coding. In addition, I will use peer debriefers and member checks as ways of improving credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The research has several potential implications. The study has the potential to inform how sport organizations develop LGBT-inclusiveness, as well the benefits and potential drawbacks of doing so. In gaining such an understanding, other sport organizations can also seek more inclusive environments, thereby benefiting all persons in the workplace.