

The Influence of a University's Social Identity on NCAA Divisional Affiliation

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Organizational change is a common construct within intercollegiate athletics. Ordinarily, change in college athletics take forms such as the matriculation of graduating students; the ascension or departure of athletic department and coaching personnel; or the construction of new or renovation of existing sport facilities. Another form of change within intercollegiate athletics deals with universities that change athletic associations.

By 1942, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) had 314 schools and included some of the most powerful colleges in the United States (Stagg, 1946; Washington, 1999; Smith 2000; Washington 2004-05). While larger schools did well, many smaller schools struggled and were not invited to NCAA tournaments or competitions. In response to this, the smaller schools created the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) comprised of schools similar to them (Washington, 1999; Washington, 2004-05; Smith, 2011). The success of the NAIA was substantial and included over 500 members by 1966 (Washington, 2004-05). In response, the NCAA restructured its organization to create two separate divisions in an attempt to gain members from the NAIA (Washington, 2004-05). Restructuring continued in 1973 when three specific divisions (Division I, II, and III) were created (Washington, 2004-05). The evolution of the NCAA created opportunities for smaller colleges to join a more established organization but maintain specific identities that define their institution. Since 1980, over 300 universities from other athletic associations opted to join the NCAA (Smith, 2011).

Social identity can be explained as the “self-image derived by actors when they categorize themselves as members of a collectivity or occupants of a role” (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003, p. 797). Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued the specific way that an organization can define itself is “a specific form of social identification” (p. 22). Ashforth and Mael (1989) also suggest that individuals “tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, and gender and age cohort” (p, 20). From a higher education perspective, colleges and universities often categorize themselves with other institutions (e.g., public/private, religious affiliation, population) to compete for state and federal funding (Liefner, 2003). Multiple identities can play an important role for universities and their decision-making process surrounding movement within intercollegiate athletics. When individuals feel their identity is being threatened, Turner (1985) noted organizations can implement three specific strategies: social creativity; social change; and social mobility.

The proposed research focuses on the social mobility strategy. This involves members exiting an in-group and joining an advantaged out-group (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003). For this proposed research, NAIA member institutions are choosing to leave the NAIA for the NCAA due to the advantages provided by the NCAA (Washington, 2004-05; Smith, 2011). Movements by some group members will be initiated in two different forms (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984). First, they will attempt to change personal characteristics to sufficiently become a member of the advantaged group (Goffman, 1963). Second, they will adopt characteristics possessed by members of the advantaged group while remaining associated with the disadvantaged group. Groups formed on the basis of sex, race, and other invariant characteristics often engage in this type of social mobility (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984).

Recent studies involving university movement between athletic associations have been analyzed through social mobility. Washington (2004-05) first examined the social identities of schools transitioning from the NAIA to the NCAA between 1973 and 1999. Washington (2004-05) considered the effects of the multiple identities as to whether or not it would impact the university decision to transfer to another organization and concluded that certain characteristics were identified more often in schools that made the transition. Specifically, Washington (2004-2005) showed that many of these organizations were influenced by schools associated with a particular athletic conference and specific groups of universities such as historical black universities and universities tied to a religious affiliation.

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While the contributions from Washington's (2004-05) study is significant, his research was limited in several respects. Specifically, Washington (2004-05) focused on the general movement into the NCAA. Since the NCAA is divided into five divisions, transferring schools must decide which level best meets their needs. Certain social identities may assist these schools with their decision in order to make the decision easier.

The proposed research attempts to address this limitation by examining NAIA membership from 1968 to 2012, with membership obtained from the NAIA. During the sample period, many universities changed athletic associations by moving from the NAIA to the NCAA and vice versa. The proposed research accounts for movement from the NAIA to both Division II and Division III. Thus, there will be two dependent variables. Both dependent variables are a 1/0 dichotomous variable that will relate to the university/year observation. A value of 1 will indicate that the university left the NAIA in the observed year and joined Division II while 0 will indicate that the university stayed in the NAIA in the observed year. The second dependent variable will take the value of 1 indicating that the university left the NAIA in the observed year and joined Division III while 0 will indicate that the university stayed in the NAIA in the observed year.

To properly analyze the probability of universities considering changing athletic associations, the proposed research will run two logistic regression models, one for Division II movement and one for Division III movement. Independent variables include identities such as religious affiliation, women's college designation, historical black college designation, and geographical location will be collected from all universities contained in the sample as well as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System website. Similar to Washington (2004-05), other independent variables will track the number of universities in each of these groups that have moved the previous year to examine how other universities' decisions within the group influences the observed university's decision to move.

These results can have important implications for the NAIA, the NCAA, and individual universities that are considering the application process for NCAA membership. It is important for university and conference administrators to understand the motivations for changing associations and determine the best positioning for their respective university. For researchers, the present research will contribute to the social mobility literature by focusing on the specific characteristics and desires of the organization to understand their motivations to consider mobility. In addition, these results can direct both qualitative and quantitative research into specific directions regarding motivational trends in social mobility.