Career Trajectory of Ethnic Minority Males to the Division I Director of Athletics Position

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Fostering administrative opportunities for ethnic minorities in sports at all levels has been an ongoing national topic of discussion. Issues of racism and access discrimination are very significant in our society. The racial inequities in leadership positions (e.g., upper management) can be seen in higher education, especially in the realm of intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, 2011). There is a lack of ethnic minorities in intercollegiate athletic departments who hold senior positions, such as athletic director. The demographics relative to the inequities within intercollegiate athletics administration are exposed in reliable reports such as the Race and Gender Demographics Report, the Gender Equity in College Coaching and Administration: Perceived Barriers Report (NCAA, 2009), and The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) Racial and Gender Report Card: College Sport (Lapchick, Hoff & Kaiser, 2011). All of these reports expose the hiring inequities within intercollegiate athletics.

The major purpose of this study was to investigate the lack of ethnic minorities in athletic director position in NCAA Division I FBS. The study sought to identify factors that influence ethnic minority male career trajectory to the athletic director position. Also, this study identifies career-enhancing tactics that may be used to increase the number of ethnic minority males in the talent pool.

Two conceptual and theoretical frameworks were used to frame, support and undergird this qualitative research study. The frameworks were the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) and Critical Race Theory. The primary focus of the LMX theory emphasizes the dyadic (i.e., one-on-one) relationships between leaders and individual subordinates. According to LMX theory, in most leadership situations, the leader does not treat all followers the same. Leaders and followers develop dyadic relationships and leaders treat individual followers differently, resulting in two groups of followers -- an in-group and an out-group. Members of the in-group receive more information, influence, confidence, and concern from their leaders than do out-group members. Additionally, they are more dependable, more highly involved, and more communicative than out-group members (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began as a movement in the law as an activist dimension that tried to ascertain how a society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but transforms itself for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT has a long tradition of resistance to the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gender lines in America.

This qualitative phenomenological study is designed to investigate the factors that influence ethnic minority males’ career advancement to the administrative position of Director of Athletics at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) member institution. Ten ethnic minority males who have held the title of a FBS Director of Athletics participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to answer the four central research questions: (1) to what extent are there common factors among the career paths of current ethnic minority male Director of Athletics within the FBS; (2) why are there a small number of ethnic minority males that have ascended to the level of Director of Athletics within the FBS.

This researcher used a qualitative research design to determine the factors that impact career trajectories for ethnic minority male athletic directors. The primary sources of data collection were face-to-face in depth interviews and a questionnaire. The research participants were selected by using a sample technique (Creswell, 2007). The accessible population consisted of athletic directors employed at NCAA FBS institutions who were employed during the 2008-11 academic years. A pilot study was conducted employing a convenience sample of participants who were currently ethnic minority male athletic directors at the Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). The pilot study provided an opportunity to determine the viability of the interview questions and survey to help enhance clarity in the understanding of the meaning of the questions (Taylor, 2004). The pilot study tested the data collection process.
The sample pool consisted of 15 ethnic minority males athletic directors purposely selected from the Division I FBS 2008-11 rosters of ethnic minority athletic director listed from the National Association of Collegiate Director of Athletics. Ten agreed to participate. Each ethnic minority male held the title of athletic director (or an incarnation thereof) for the 2008-11 academic school years. The researcher utilized the Creswell (2007) simplified modified version of Stevick-Colaizzi Keen’s method to analyze the data.

An analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three major themes that emerged as common factors in the career trajectory of the ethnic minority male experience in advancing to the position of Director of Athletics: (1) Key career advancement factors, (2) Racial stereotyping and (3) Denied access to career enhancing positions.

The findings in this study describe barriers and identify potential obstacles for ethnic minority males who may aspire to the administrative position of Director of Athletics at the Division I FBS level. A better understanding of the factors and barriers that impact career trajectory is very important to building diversity and facilitating the inclusion of ethnic minority males as viable candidates for the position. This study also identifies career-enhancing tactics that may be used to increase the number of ethnic minority males in the talent pool. Analysis of responses to questionnaires identified career-enhancing preparation tactics. Among those tactics are: (1) Identify a recognizable champion, (2) Obtain experience in development and budget management, (3) Build relationships with individuals who can guide, correct, and affirm, and (4) Introduce yourself to search firms.

This research is important, given the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the position of Director of Athletics at NCAA Division I FBS member institutions. To understand more fully how and why this underrepresentation persists, this study was undertaken to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of ethnic minority male athletic directors regarding their career trajectory to the position of Director of Athletics.