Profiling Ethical Leaders in Intercollegiate Athletics: Perspectives of Athletic Administrators

Calvin Nite, Texas Tech University
Trevor Bopp, University of Florida
Christopher Powell, Texas Tech University

Questions of ethics and ethical leadership are not new to the institution of intercollegiate athletics. However, the groundswell of calls for reforming intercollegiate athletics seems to be reaching a tipping point. Over the past few years, university presidents and governing bodies seem to be more willing to address public and media outcries bemoaning various frustrations with the intercollegiate athletic enterprise. We have seen concessions regarding the Football Bowl Subdivision’s (FBS) post season with the addition of a “playoff system;” the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) retreat from stiff punishments of questionable rules violations at the University of Miami, Texas A&M University, and the University of Oregon; and even the NCAA’s willingness to revisit many of its arbitrary rules within its manuals. Considering this building momentum for the substantial changes within the intercollegiate athletic enterprise, now seems to be an appropriate time to examine ethics and leadership within this context. As such, various scholars and even the Journal of Intercollegiate Sport have issued numerous calls for more attention to ethical leadership within intercollegiate athletics.

The concept of ethical leadership has received ample attention; however, locating specific definitions for ethical leadership has proved challenging (Brown & Trevino, 2006). This difficulty largely stems from the multiple philosophical and theoretical conceptions of ethics. General consensus among various scholars suggests that ethical leadership encompasses what should be done when leading organizations (Brown & Trevino; 2006; Brown et al., 2005). That is, ethical leaders are generally seen as fair, trustworthy, honest, and principled decision-makers who have high levels of integrity (Brown et al, 2005; Trevino, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). Additionally, research has suggested that ethical leadership is positively correlated with the personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009; Xu, Yu, & Shi, 2011). Further, ethical leaders likely possess strong communication skills and also reward desired ethical behavior of employees or followers (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Trevino et al., 2000, 2003).

Although ethical leadership has been extensively reviewed within other fields and disciplines, there has been limited empirical research examining ethical leadership within the context of sport and intercollegiate athletics. Ethics research within this context has generally focused on the ethics of the NCAA (see Stieber, 1991), the role of college athletics on campus (see Shulman & Bowen, 2002; Sperber, 2000), and the spending habits of athletic departments (see Lumpkin, 2008; Shulman & Bowen, 2002; Sperber, 2000). Scholars have suggested that the continued commercialization of intercollegiate athletics for the pursuit of university profit, power, and prestige has likely resulted in enduring ethical challenges for university and athletic department administrators (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2003). The ethical challenges for these leaders may be further complicated by the divergent pursuits of educational and commercial outcomes within their athletic endeavors (see Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008).

As the “front porch” of a college or university (Shulman & Bowen, 2002), athletic department leaders should be held accountable for the moral and ethical management and development of their programs and student athletes (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2010). In this regard, scholars have called for greater attention to ethical concerns and ethical leadership within athletics (see Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013; Lumpkin, 2008; Sparks, 2001), with particular attention being paid to ethical dealings with athletes (Burton & Welty Peachey, 2013; Sharp & Shelley, 2008). Despite the calls for ethical leadership within this context, there has been a lack of empirical research into this topic. Before any discussion can be had regarding this concept, it is important to outline the tenets of ethical leadership within intercollegiate athletics so that scholars have a foundational understanding of what it may actually mean to be ethical in this context.

Thus, the purpose of this presentation is to highlight the specific tenets of ethical leadership within intercollegiate athletics from the perspectives of high-level athletics administrators. Although certain principles of ethical leadership may be fairly comprehensive across organizations and fields, it is important to understand how ethical leadership
may be operationalized or manifested within the institution of intercollegiate athletics. It is also important to identify unique tenets of ethical leadership within this context that may further expand current frameworks of the concept within other disciplines. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: What does it mean to for leaders to be ethical in the context of intercollegiate athletics?

RQ2: How is ethical leadership operationalized within intercollegiate athletics?

RQ3: What is unique about ethical leadership within intercollegiate athletics when compared to other fields?

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, we implemented qualitative research methods to gain insight into the conceptualizations of ethical leadership within intercollegiate athletics. Specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with athletic administrators at various universities to garner their perceptions of ethical leadership. In sum, fourteen (N = 14) athletic department administrators from four (N = 4) different institutions of higher learning agreed to participate in this study. The institutions included two large NCAA Division I universities, one NCAA Division II university, and one NCAA Division III university. Included as participants were two athletics directors (n = 2), eight associate athletics directors (n = 8), one faculty athletic representative (n = 1), one member academic support services (n = 1), one member of the compliance staff (n =1) and one operations employee (n =1). Transcripts were loaded into Atlas.ti 7 qualitative data analysis software and analyzed using the grounded theory techniques of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Trustworthiness was achieved via member checking, data triangulation, and external reviews of the research process and findings.

The findings from this study outline athletic administrators’ perspectives regarding the characteristics (personality and character traits) and the behaviors of ethical leaders in intercollegiate athletics. Our data analysis suggested that ethical leaders in this context are people of integrity who are trustworthy, honest, transparent, genuine, and consistent. Further, ethical leaders in intercollegiate athletics follow the prescribed rules set forth by their governing bodies, prioritize their university’s endeavors, and operate as servant leaders. The unique findings from this study were that ethical leaders prioritize the mission and objectives of the university over the needs of individuals and that ethical leaders should also operate as servant leaders. This study provides further evidence of the contradictory axioms within intercollegiate athletics and how these contradictions may create administrative difficulties for athletic department personnel and sport managers in similar contexts. The implications of the findings from this research are further discussed.