The Battle Scars of Searching for Organizational Legitimacy: A Historical Review of the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics

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Several researchers acknowledged organizational legitimacy is considered as one of the primary predictors of both firm and industry success (DePoot & Suchman, 2008; Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby & Sahlin, 2008; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Sergiovanni & Corbally, 1984). Suchman (1995) defined organizational legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p.574).

Organizational legitimacy differs substantially from two other closely related terms: 1) status and 2) reputation. Status is known as “a socially constructed, intersubjectively agreed-upon and accepted ordering or ranking” of social actors (Washington & Zajac, 2005, p. 284). Reputation is defined as “a generalized expectation about a firm’s future behavior or performance based on collective perceptions (either direct or, more often, vicarious) of past behavior or performance” (DePoot & Suchman, 2008, p. 59-60; cf. Ferguson, Deephouse, & Ferguson, 2000; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). Although these concepts are very similar in nature, legitimacy is fundamentally dichotomous from both status and reputation since legitimation is a question of satisficing to an acceptable standard (DePoot & Suchman, 2008). As such, firms attempt to obtain legitimacy to serve as an anchor from which organizations could successfully position themselves based on society’s determination of appropriate actions for reputable organizations (Suchman, 1995). Furthermore, legitimacy should be viewed as fundamentally non-rival, meaning that positive feedback and confidence creates win-win situations of mutual affirmation among legitimate actors (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Legitimacy is also homogenized as it produces a herd-like conformity along an organization’s rationalized myths (DePoot & Suchman, 2008).

Successful organizations will often seek measures to obtain legitimacy based on societal measures that will also lead to gains in status and reputation. According to Oliver (1997), firms will often accomplish this goal through the use of affiliation. Affiliations provide firms with opportunities to acquire tangible and intangible resources that are unavailable to independent organizations (Chang & Hong, 2000). Within intercollegiate athletics, affiliation focuses on the associations universities have among other institutions. Specifically, the organizational field of intercollegiate athletics is comprised of the largest and popular athletic association governing bodies: the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA).

Both organizations compete over symbolic resources and legitimization through the acceptance of field participants that are needed for survival (Washington, 2004). These elements are essential for these firms compared to material and tangible resources since both organizations institute different strategies to acquire environmental resources (Galvin, 2002). In addition, both athletic associations conduct what is known as institutional strategy, which describes “patterns of actions that are concerned with managing the institutional structure” of membership and standards of practice (Lawrence, 1999, p. 162).

Past research on affiliations has attempted to understand how practices spread, or diffuse, throughout a recognized area of institutional life (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Strang & Soule, 1998). The NAIA and the NCAA continually implemented measures in order to attract members and maintain their respective legitimacy throughout their respective histories. Both organizations faced mimetic pressures in order to adapt in the ever changing world of intercollegiate athletics. Mimetic pressures arise from uncertainty and lead organizations to imitate their perceived successful peers (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These pressures differ from other pressures that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described as a catalyst for firms to alter their structure to remain more homogeneous with other respected institutions. Specifically, coercive pressures stem from political influences and other power relationships.
Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008) while normative pressures center on what an organization deems as a proper course of action or moral duty to act (Suchman, 1995).

The purpose of this investigation is to look at the pursuit of organizational legitimacy by the NAIA and its impact on the membership decisions of the NAIA over the collective history (i.e., 1937 to 2012) of the organization. Concentrating on using a historical review of primary and secondary sources, this investigation made use of the constructionist approach to make connections between theory and the explanation or relationship between events or strategies chosen by the NAIA and the aforementioned battle scars. The theoretical lens in this case concentrates on organizational legitimacy and involves a brief discussion which attempts to differentiate it from status and reputation. The institutional strategy described within is influenced by internal causation/event and social change that took place between 1937 and 2012.

This investigation is unique compared to other research that has explored the membership history of the NAIA. For example, both Smith, Williams, Soebbing, and Washington (2013) and Washington (2004-05) reviewed the status of NAIA member colleges and universities from 1968 to 2011 through logistic regression to determine if social identities influence college movement. Smith (2011) reviewed the reasons for moving from NAIA to the NCAA of the more recent era through interviews with seven institutions. All of these studies briefly provide a historical account of the context of the movement decisions.

This review (i.e., 60% completed) will show that few membership organizations fought as hard for organizational legitimacy as the NAIA. Within, this work will highlight how the NAIA sought legitimacy through various institutional strategies that established an early conflict and later partnership with the NCAA, used the media as a tool, developed innovative postseason arrangements, and involved various governance decisions to integrate the membership. Next, this work also focused on whether there was support from others in granting the group organization legitimacy as Deephouse and Suchman (2008), Desai (2011), Galaskiewicz (1985) offered was possible. Specific support from outsiders and other members (e.g., Amateur Athletic Union, United States Olympic Committee) are recognized as helping to establishment of organizational legitimacy of the NAIA.

Finally, it should be noted that institutional strategy requires organizations or associations “to articulate, sponsor and defend particular practices and organizational forms as legitimate or desirable, rather than the ability to enact already legitimized practices or leverage existing social rules” (Lawrence, 1999, p. 163). Rerup and Feldman (2011) suggested institutional strategy can be deliberately develop or surface through happenstance. This work will show both deliberate strategy and happenstance with respect to the NAIA’s search for legitimacy.