From Change Agent to Maintenance Agent: The Evolution of the NCAA as an Institutional Entrepreneur

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Abstract 2015-123

The field of intercollegiate athletics has proven to be a valuable context for studies of institutional theory (e.g. Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013; Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008; Washington, 2004; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). As an institution, big-time intercollegiate athletics remains heavily contested with its conceptual foundations and key actors enduring seemingly endless scrutiny. Despite this, the institution has maintained and perpetuated its contrivance of high-profile “amateur” sport despite numerous calls for extensive reforms. The perseverance of this institution can be attributed to the work of key actors, namely the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), that continuously reinforce institutional norms amidst detractions. In this study, we invoke the framework of institutional entrepreneurship to examine the creation and maintenance of the institution of big-time intercollegiate athletics. That is, we are interested in “the activities of actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004, pg. 657). As such, we examine the historical transformations of the NCAA to understand how institutional entrepreneurship evolves from creating or changing institutions to ultimately maintaining the created institutions.

In efforts to understand institutional change, scholars have invoked the framework of institutional entrepreneurship. While early conceptualizations of institutional theory accounted for agency’s role in perpetuating and changing institutional orders (see DiMaggio, 1988), the role of agency became minimized as new institutional theory focused more so on institutional structure rather than praxis (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008). First introduced by DiMaggio (1988), institutional entrepreneurs have been characterized as change agents who initiate divergent change and are key actors in the change process (Battilana et al., 2009). Others have also suggested that institutional entrepreneurs may work to maintain institutions (Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). General consensus has been that institutional entrepreneurs are actors in unique power positions with institutions who possess the political status and authority to implement change (Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Meyer, 2006). Further, these powerful actors have the ability to create visions for change, recruit allies, and mobilize resources to initiate changes to the institutionalized orders (Battilana et al., 2009). Although extensive research has examined institutional entrepreneurs and change, less research has examined institutional entrepreneurs as maintenance agents (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Models explaining how institutional change agents are produced (see Seo & Creed, 2002) and how institutions are maintained (see Lawrence, 1999; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Lok & de Rond, 2013; Zilber, 2009) have been valuable, yet these models are limited because they do not account for the transition that is made from changing an institution to then maintaining and perpetuating the newly created institution. Further, contrary to Seo and Creed’s (2002) theorization, not all institutions are radically changed when confronted with institutional contradictions. Indeed, agents work to repair and reinforce contestations to preserve the institution and stave off change (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). It is incumbent to understand how one transitions from change agent to maintenance agent within institutions. Thus, this study examines the history of intercollegiate athletics and the institutional entrepreneurship of the NCAA to provide insight into the evolutionary process of progressing from change agent to maintenance agent. The NCAA is appropriate for this endeavor because it has served as an institutional entrepreneur in creating and perpetuating the institution of big-time intercollegiate athletics. Once the institution had been constructed, the NCAA enacted entrepreneurial strategies to maintain its legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of the institution.

This paper presents a historical analysis of key episodes in governance struggles that shaped intercollegiate athletics
in the U.S. Historical research requires the systematic collection and analysis of archival data (Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). For this study, we relied upon several key primary data sources, including the archives of the NCAA, the AIAW, and the NAIA. We also consulted various secondary documents, such as the dissertations of Flath (1963), Hoover (1958), Wu (1997), and Land (1977) which all provided insight into the early debates in intercollegiate athletics and the evolutions of key organizations. The history of U.S. collegiate athletics is also well documented in both empirical studies that use economic and financial analyses (Stern, 1979; 1981) and in cultural/sociological accounts (Baxter and Lambert, 1990). Collectively, these primary and secondary documents, as well as the subsequent empirical analyses, provide a broad, complementary set of data for this historical analysis. Following Kieser (1994) and Hargadon and Douglas (2001), we made an inductive historical analysis of the institutional strategies employed by associations engaged in a competitive struggle for control and status in U.S. intercollegiate athletics. We conducted this analysis iteratively in three phases. The first phase emphasized primary sources in an effort to establish a time line of significant events. The second phase involved capturing the post hoc interpretations of these events from the vantage point of elapsed time. We used secondary sources to substantial advantage in this phase. In the final phase of analysis, we reviewed the provisional findings of the first two phases of analysis within the specific context of institutional entrepreneurship and maintenance. Thus, we sought to answer the following questions: Who were the institutional entrepreneurs? What kind of strategic moves did they employ? What strategic advantages and enabling resources did they use in implementing these strategies? How was the NCAA able to defend its legitimacy and authority once it was established as the dominant voice of intercollegiate athletics?

The results of this study provide insight into institutional entrepreneurship within intercollegiate athletics. During the early history of U.S. college athletics, the dominant actors were state or land grant colleges and the prestigious colleges from the East Coast (Smith, 1988; Washington, 1999). Yet through political sanctioning from the U.S. president in response to safety concerns with football, in 1905 the NCAA was founded with 38 original members. The NCAA’s entrepreneurship continued until the NCAA had 190 member schools (and more than 100 other schools that had some type of partial membership) that included “nearly every college or university of importance in the country” (Stagg, 1946: 81). The NCAA quickly became a dominant governance institution for collegiate and amateur athletics in the United States, eventually gaining control of all major men and women’s collegiate athletics. It was at this point where the NCAA’s entrepreneurship shifted from institutional creation to institutional maintenance. To maintain its control and reinforce its legitimacy, the NCAA absorbed smaller, less influential universities into its creation despite an enormous loss of revenue (e.g. In 1999, the NCAA Division II and III Championships operated at a deficit of $9.1 million). Further, the NCAA has made incremental changes to demonstrate reflexivity to maintain its legitimacy among its various stakeholders (e.g. recruiting rule changes, increased stipends, yielding control of football to the BCS). Ultimately, these strategies resulted in the NCAA becoming and remaining the dominant voice in intercollegiate athletics.

This research contributes to understanding the evolution of institutional entrepreneurship. In this presentation, we situate our findings within institutional theory and provide a preliminary model for explaining the process of transitioning from change agent to maintenance agent as an institutional entrepreneur. This provides a bridge between conceptualizations of institutional entrepreneurs as change agents (see Battilana et al., 2009) and others suggesting they also serve to maintain institutions (see Hardy & Maguire, 2008). The theoretical and practical implications of this research will be discussed at length.