Reclassifying from NAIA: Are There Differences in Applications between Division II and Division III?

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Atletic success is typically synonymous with universities associated with participating in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and Division I (Getz & Siegfried, 2010; McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; Mixon & Hsing, 1994; Mixon & Ressler, 1995; Mixon, Trevino, & Minto, 2004). For schools lacking athletic achievements, the novelty of sport success becomes a cost-effective marketing instrument encouraging potential students to view the institution differently and consider applying (Tomasini, 2005).

For example, the unprecedented success of Boston College’s (BC) football team in 1984 led to the school receiving a 30% increase in student applications in 1985 (Hansen, 2011; Tomasini, 2005). This phenomenon is known as the Flutie Effect, which is named after BC Quarterback and Heisman Trophy winner Doug Flutie (Castle & Kostelnik, 2011; Collins, 2012; Litan, Orszag, & Orszag, 2003). Similarly, both Butler University and George Mason University achieved a similar effect following their respective successful runs to the Final Four of the NCAA Division I men’s basketball tournament (Baker, 2008; Dosh, 2012).

As the correlation between athletic success and an applications increase became apparent, Tomasini (2005) noted university stakeholders have a desire to place their school in the best possible position for success. Specifically, university officials view athletics as an effective advertising vehicle for the university and are willing to contribute scarce resources (i.e., facilities, financing, staff positions, etc.) to athletic programs success initiatives in order to secure a solid return on that investment (Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Dwyer, Braa, Eddy, & Havard, 2010; Goff, 2000; Smith, 2011; Tomasini, 2005; Weaver, 2010). The return comes in the form of applications, enrollment, alumni donations, sporting event attendance, public perception, prestige, and visibility. As such, officials will review other athletic avenues where a return can be achieved. These changes include the addition or removal of programs, the hiring and firing of coaching staffs, the construction or the renovation of facilities, and the decision to affiliate with a particular conference or possibly change athletic affiliations (Collins, 2012).

Historically, schools changing their athletic affiliation occurred at a steady pace since the 1950s when the NCAA and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) established themselves as the premiere intercollegiate sport associations in the United States (Washington, 2004, 2004-05). Although the NCAA is considered more prestigious due to its prominent university membership (Getz & Siegfried, 2010), the NAIA differentiates from the NCAA by supporting smaller schools such as teaching colleges, liberal arts colleges, and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). By providing governance to this selection of schools, the NAIA was able to grow and compete with the NCAA for new members in the mid-20th Century.

However, in 1973, the NCAA engaged in a reorganizational effort, developing the current three divisional structure (Falla, 1981; Washington, 2004-05). This alignment was directly aimed to entice NAIA member schools to join either Division II or III since both divisions shared many of the NAIA’s values and goals (Wilson 2005). Smith, Soebbing, and Washington (in press) noted schools associated with the NAIA shared many similarities with schools aligned with Division II and III but not Division I. Furthermore, the NCAA provided strong financial support to both Division II and III by offering funds from its Division I football contract with the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) (“Football Rights Fees Announced”, 1976; Washington, 2004-05). The 1973 reorganizational effort proved to be highly successful for the NCAA and provided opportunities to schools for which they previously could not categorize (Katz, 1990; Katz & McClendon, 1988; Land, 1977). As such, many NAIA member officials were enticed to leave the small school organization to obtain the benefits offered by the NCAA.
While the perception to change affiliations is enticing, past research on reclassifications has found mixed results in several areas for reclassifying institutions including applications (Dwyer et al., 2010; Frieder, 2007; Tomasini, 2005; Weaver, 2010). Furthermore, many of these studies are limited to qualitative and case study methodologies and have only explored reclassification efforts from an interorganizational change (i.e., changing divisions within the NCAA) as opposed to a change in athletic affiliation.

The proposed research addresses these limitations and provides a quantitative analysis to determine if an institution receives a temporary increase in applications due to a school's change in affiliation from the NAIA to the NCAA Division II or III. The dependent variable for this proposed research is the natural logarithm of the total number of applications received by a university in the current year. Application figures since 2002 can be obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) database, which surveys from all post-secondary institutions that receive federal funding (“About IPEDS”, n.d.). As a result of a continuous dependent variable, an Ordinary Least Squares regression model will be used. The regression model will also incorporate methodology developed by Coates and Humphreys (2005) in their study on the Novelty Effect of new professional sports facilities. Specifically, Coates and Humphreys (2005) analyzed the age of a stadium to determine if the novelty of new facilities attracted individuals to attend games. In terms of NCAA affiliation, this model will create a reclassification age variable to analyze a university’s age of affiliation with either Division II or III to help analyze universities reclassifying before 2002.

The unit of observation is a university-year, which is in accordance with the IPEDS database. The independent variables used include the length in membership in either Division II or III in the observed year and an indicator variable that notes the first five years and first ten years of NCAA affiliation. Control variables include the total number of sports programs provided; success in football, men’s basketball, and women’s basketball; the quality of education as a function of out-of-state tuition; student-faculty ratio; association with the Common Application; and social identities such as private school designation, religious affiliation, HBCU designation, and women’s only college designation.

These results can have important implications on university decision makers considering an affiliation with the NCAA. For researchers, the proposed research addresses Washington and Patterson’s (2011) call to integrate institutional legitimacy within sport management research. Specifically, this study extends the use of institutional theory and legitimation throughout the history of intercollegiate athletics and provides and to why the NCAA became the premiere athletic association while the NAIA serves a niche position within the organizational field.