Collaboration and Communication: Exploring Relationships between Athletic Directors and University Presidents

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The landscape of college athletics is rapidly changing, and the future of the NCAA, its structure, membership, and leadership has never been more uncertain than it is today. Due to issues like conference realignment, deregulation, academic integrity, and presidential control, the NCAA is in a debate over topics that could significantly change its path. As member institutions work toward a shared vision and future, the role of the athletic director (AD) continues to evolve and change. What a job description once looked like for the leader of a collegiate athletic department is vastly different than what it looks like today. The majority of ADs report working 60-70+ hours per week, with much of their time being spent on fundraising and budgetary issues (Smith, 2014).

Given the changing landscape of college athletics, the need for strong leadership on the part of the athletic directors is critical. A few researchers in the field of sport management have begun looking into topics related to leadership in college athletics, most of which has focused on different leadership styles and effectiveness (Ryska, 2010; Branch, 1990; Burton & Welty-Peachey, 2009, 2013). Burton & Welty-Peachey indicate a need for more servant leadership styles in college athletics (2013), and cite ADs who use transformational over transactional leadership as being more effective (2009).

Looking at existing literature, one can also find research on the traits needed to be an athletic director, the background and path of athletic directors, and the development of relationships with subordinates. However, there is a lack of information on the relationship between an athletic director and his or her boss, the university president. As the NCAA gives more responsibility and authority to university presidents, there is an increasing need for ADs to have comfortable and confident relationships with their presidents. There is clear evidence in the business-related literature that a strong relationship between a CEO and his or her Board of Directors (mirroring that of an AD and his or her president) leads to more efficient and effective organizations (Tsui, et al., 2006; Wang, Tsui, & Xin, 2011; Westphal, 1999). The current study is intended to extend this idea to college athletics, exploring the relationship between NCAA Division I athletic directors and their presidents.

Research Design

The research questions focused on what ADs see as the ideal relationship between themselves and their presidents, how to work toward that ideal relationship, and what the key components are in maintaining an ideal relationship. In looking for shared understandings of leadership, a qualitative approach was taken in which the researchers collected and analyzed the lived experiences of ADs expressed through their own words.

Twelve ADs from a variety of NCAA Division I institutions were interviewed for this study. They were recruited using a snowball technique, meaning that the researchers made initial contact with potential participants, and then asked them for references of others who might consider participation in the study, and who might provide rich, descriptive opinions on the topic (Krauchek & Ranson, 1999). Interviews were conducted over the telephone, lasted approximately one-hour each, and were recorded. The researchers used a discussion guide to conduct the interviews, which provided a loose and flexible framework to help build trust and rapport with participants, and encourage them to talk about their experiences.

This study was conducted in a manner consistent with constructivism, a philosophy of inquiry that affirms realities as multiple and socially constructed, as well as context dependent (Guba, 1990). For this research project, being an AD for an NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics department is the social construct that creates the cultural context within which the concepts of leadership and ideal relationships between ADs and presidents were explored.
The themes that emerged from these interviews provides a clearer picture of how NCAA Division I ADs understand leadership in the context of their position as well as their presidents’ positions, and what constitutes (or detracts from) ideal relationships between ADs and presidents. The researchers used comparative analysis procedures to further the discovery of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Utilizing analytic induction, the researchers looked for conceptual categories within the text of each interview transcript, and then for shared understandings (confirmation of the conceptual categories) between all interviews. The goal of the researchers was to attain redundancy—or mutual consistency and saturation of data—as described by McCracken (1988) and Jensen (2002). The researchers found mutual consistency of the data by the time they reached 12 interviews.

Results & Discussion
Conceptual categories that emerged throughout the interviews regarding factors that contribute to ideal relationships between ADs and presidents include: communication, trust, balance, access, and alignment of goals and interests. These factors, if ignored or violated, could also detract from ideal relationships. For example, communication and trust are exemplified through the phrase “no surprises,” which was used by many participants to describe the importance of ADs and presidents keeping each other in the loop on major developments. Other conceptual categories that participants cited as potential pitfalls to the development of ideal relationships include “getting into the weeds,” and failing to “stay in your lane.” Both of these phrases were used by several participants to describe presidents or ADs who try to manage issues or influence policies that are beyond the scope of their expertise.

Participants also discussed the concept of roles in relationship to AD leadership and presidential leadership. Conceptual categories that emerged throughout the interviews regarding AD leadership include: mission, vision, and values (typically discussed together), resources, and hiring decisions. Participants compared and contrasted presidential roles with their own in terms of scale, scope, expectations, and risks. For example, several participants said that one of the roles of an AD is to “make the president look good,” whereas one of the roles of a president is to provide a favorable impression of the university as a whole. ADs also indicated that athletics-related problems pose a risk to presidents as well as ADs, because of the prominent role athletics often play on campus and in the media.

Finally, participants related their ideas about ideal relationships and roles of ADs and presidents to a national scale (i.e., NCAA Division I as a whole). Several participants expressed frustration with groups of university presidents getting involved on a number of issues, and not consulting their own or other ADs for guidance before building policy around those issues. Some participants indicated that deregulation and the recently redesigned NCAA Division I governance structure discourages increased consultation between groups of presidents and ADs. Participants believed that this could lead to more tension between these groups, as well as between athletic departments and the NCAA itself.

The results of this study indicate a need for increased communication between ADs and presidents, and a desire from the AD perspective to work toward that. It is the hope that we can build on this research moving forward, and offer practical implications that can be useful to both sport management faculty and those in the college athletics field.