Examining Diversity and Inclusion as an Indicator of Success in College Athletics: The Case for Building an Inclusive Workplace

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Sport organizations continue to foster cultures of similarity that lack diversity and discourage differing perspectives—this is particularly the case in intercollegiate athletics. In fact, college sport received its lowest grade in more than a decade for racial hiring practices (Lapchick et al., 2014), and the percentage of female coaches and administrators continues to decline (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Furthermore, the work environments within sport organizations are not always welcoming or supportive of minority employees (Cunningham, 2008, 2015b; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Walker & Melton, 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

Interestingly, though past research paints a bleak picture of college sport, there is some evidence that times might be changing. Cunningham (2015a), for instance, recently examined two Northeastern athletic departments that promote workplace diversity and champion inclusion efforts. Findings from his case study revealed these athletic departments adopt a proactive approach to diversity and inclusion (D&I) management—always seeking ways to improve their current strengths and trying to identify potential areas of concern. While most instances of inclusion appear in more liberal settings (Anderson, 2011; Fink et al., 2012), there are signs of change in less progressive areas. The traditional football programs in the state of Texas are led by African American men, the San Antonio Spurs hired the first female assistant coach in the NBA, and Drew Martin, an athletic administrator at Texas Christian University (TCU), was fully supported by his colleagues and student-athletes after he publically disclosed his sexual orientation on OutSports.com (Zeigler, 2014).

Considering most researchers examining D&I in sport have adopted qualitative approaches, it is unclear if these are isolated examples or a developing trend in college sport. Thus, the purpose of the research was to assess the current climate for D&I within intercollegiate athletics. To do so we drew from Ferdman’s (2014) multi-level framework for inclusion, which contends inclusion operates at multiple levels within an organization (e.g., individual experiences, group dynamics, leader behaviors, organizational policies), to explore what elements of inclusion are present within NCAA Division I athletic departments. In addition, given that past work has primarily focused on gender, race, and sexual orientation, the study incorporated a broad view by examining differences based on surface-level and deep-level (e.g., personality, values, attitudes) diversity dimensions. The investigation was guided by the following research questions: How does D&I manifest in college sport? Specifically, do certain patterns emerge with respect to level of diversity and commitment to inclusion practices?

There is substantial empirical support for why athletic departments should promote diversity and inclusion. Consistent with the categorization-elaboration model (van Knippenberg et al., 2004), heterogeneous groups— comprised of people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives—are thought to increase organizational performance because of the greater creativity, decision making, and problem solving capabilities within the group. Nonetheless, these benefits are only realized when diversity is combined with an inclusive work environment (Ferdman, 2014). Cunningham and colleagues’ (Cunningham, 2008, 2009, 2011; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004) work certainly demonstrates these relationships. Based on this literature, we hypothesize that athletic departments that are both diverse and foster inclusivity will perform better than their peers on objective measures (H1) and subjective measures (H2) of organizational success.

In addition to organizational outcomes, diverse and inclusive workplaces also benefit individual employees. Specifically, minority employees are less likely to leave the organization (Walker & Melton, 2015) and report greater psychological safety. Psychological safety (PS) refers to “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Those who feel psychologically safe within the work group setting believe (a) they can take risks, (b) others value their opinions, and (c) group members respect their contributions. Both researchers and practitioners suggest PS is essential to enhance employee
satisfaction and performance (Ferdman, 2014; Kelly & Kelly, 2013). Thus, we expect administrators working in diverse and inclusive departments will report higher PS and DT (H3 and H4).

Senior administrators from National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I universities participated in the study. The sample was mostly Caucasian (84.9%), identified as heterosexual (80.3%), and was evenly split among men (50.3%) and women (49.7%). They ranged in age from 25 to 80 years (M = 41.81, SD = 10.22). The mean department tenure of 8.61 years (SD = 7.42) while the mean occupational tenure was 18.81 years (SD = 9.63).

The study variables were collected through questionnaires and archival data. To assess the athletic department’s inclusion climate, we measured department inclusive policies and practices, which included formal inclusive polices (α = .94), leader support for inclusion (α = .95), coworker support for inclusion (α = .96), conflict resolution techniques (α = .91), and noninclusive language usage (α = .90). Based on Harrison et al. (1998, 2002), surface-level diversity (i.e., age, race, biological sex) and deep-level diversity dimensions (i.e., sexual orientation, religion, personality, values, attitudes) were measured using single-item scales. Points earned through the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) Directors’ Cup (see www.nacda.com) served as an organizational-level dependent variable. We also measured administrators’ subjective assessment of the department’s success. For individual-level outcomes, we measured PS (α = .86) using Edmondson’s (1999) 7-item scale (and department tenure (DT)).

We emailed a link to an electronic questionnaire to high level athletic administrators (athletic director, associate and assistant athletic directors, and senior woman administrators) from all 346 NCAA Division I institutions (n = 2046). While data were collected from individual administrators, the hypotheses related to performance were concerned with the department as a whole. As such, it was necessary to aggregate the data from the individual to the department level. After aggregating the data (based on Dixon & Cunningham, 2006), the sample decreased from 411 administrators to 147 departments, or 42.4% of all NCAA DI athletic departments.

To answer the research questions, we first conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis with a random sample of 35 administrators, which demonstrated support for a three cluster D&I climate solution. Results of cluster analyses, with the entire sample, revealed three distinct groups. Athletic departments (n = 40) in the first group, Low Diversity and Weak Inclusive Policies (LDWIP), had low surface-level and deep-level diversity and scored low on inclusive policies and practices. In the second group (n = 29), Diversity Only, Weak Inclusive Policies (DWIP), athletic departments had higher diversity (except for gender diversity), but lacked inclusive policies and practices. The third group (n = 78), Diversity and Strong Inclusive Policies (DSIP); had high diversity (except for personality and values) and strong inclusive policies and practices.

MANCOVA was used to test all hypotheses. After controlling for FBS status, undergraduate enrollment, city equality index, and department revenues, there was a multivariate effect, Wilk’s lambda = .87, F (4,274) = 5.14, p = .001. The univariate effects showed significant differences in NACDA points and subjective assessment of success based on climate, as athletic departments with a DSIP climate earned significantly more points (M = 260.57, SD = 269.99) and reported higher success (M = 5.10, SD = 1.17) than those with a DWIP climate (M = 160.81, SD = 237.62; M = 4.14, SD = 1.5) and a LDWIP climate (M = 114.85, SD = 150.35; M = 4.10, SD = 1.31). Thus, H1 and H2 were supported. To examine individual-level outcomes, we included all administrators who work for a department that was included in the cluster analysis (n = 332). After controlling for sexual orientation, race, and biological sex, there was a multivariate effect, Wilk’s lambda = .81, F (6,604) = 11.45, p < .001. Results support H3 and H4, as the univariate effects showed significant differences in PS and DT based on climate. Administrators working within a DSIP climate reported highest PS (M = 5.46, SD = .78) and DT (M = 10.56, SD = 8.16).

Results of the study offer insights into the current climate of D&I within college sport. Specifically, there is a sizable portion of athletic departments that are concerned with employing diverse workforces and fostering cultures of inclusivity. However, it seems athletic departments are focused primarily on diversity, and not ensuring employees feel valued and safe to express their authentic opinions and identities. This is unfortunate as inclusive polices and practices not only related to higher PS and DT, but also attract talented and diverse job applicants (Fink et al., 2003; Melton & Cunningham, 2012). Thus, athletic departments should focus efforts on establishing formal policies and educating their employees on how to support inclusivity. Such activities will not only enhance work conditions for current employees, but can also improve the department’s ability to increase diversity. During the presentation we will further discuss theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future directions.