Institutional Entrepreneurship to Avoid Change: The NCAA’s Institutional Maintenance Strategies

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Intercollegiate athletics under the governance of the NCAA has been one of the more heavily scrutinized and defended institutions in all of sport. Since its inception more than 100 years ago, the NCAA’s dominance has been contested by internal and external challengers that have called for reform (e.g. Benford, 2007; Gurney, 2009), litigated rules (e.g. NCAA v. Board of Regents; O’Bannon v. NCAA), or have attempted to offer alternative models of governance (e.g. National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics; Amateur Athletic Union). Despite these attempts at substantial change, the NCAA has maintained its position of authority within the field. As such, intercollegiate athletics and the NCAA offer a pertinent context for studying how institutions persist despite threats of change.

Scholars have theorized that institutional change may be inevitable as competing logics and interests likely give rise to change agents (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002). That is, individuals that may find themselves disadvantaged within an institution may seek to exploit weaknesses in the underlying logics and vie for more favorable institutional arrangements (Seo & Creed, 2002). In this sense, institutions may be inherently unstable with institutional change being an unending cycle. However, numerous institutions, sport and non-sport alike, have endured for substantial periods of time without massive upheavals. Intercollegiate sport as shaped by the NCAA represents one such institution. Previous research has shown that intercollegiate sport is characterized by contradicting institutional logics (Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013; Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008; Washington & Ventresca, 2008) with various entities challenging the NCAA’s governance because of these contradictions (Washington, 2004; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). This persistence in the face of ardent challenges suggests that forces within the institution may actively combat change efforts.

In recent years, scholars have recognized that "maintenance is not a stable property of the institutional order and various forms of work may be necessary to ensure institutional continuity and stability" (Micelotta & Washington, 2013, p. 1138). That is, previous conceptualizations of unaided self-reproduction of institutional norms may be insufficient explanations of institutional perseverance (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Under the umbrella of institutional work (see Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), maintenance work consists of the actions undertaken within an institution to protect the status, power, and legitimacy of institutional arrangements from threats (Quinn Trank & Washington, 2009). Relatively understudied as compared to change work, scholars have found that institutional maintenance work consists of expanding institutional boundaries (Currie et al., 2012; Lok & de Rond; Washington, 2004), re-establishing and re-institutionalizing various institutional orders (Micelotta & Washington, 2013), and even drawing from externalities to legitimize practices (Edwards & Washington, 2015). However, the relative youth of the institutional maintenance work perspective and its limited study in sport management necessitates further explorations of maintenance strategies for combating threats to institutional arrangements.

The purpose of this study was to examine the NCAA’s strategies for maintaining power and legitimacy within intercollegiate athletics. We identified key historical episodes that threatened to upend the NCAA’s governance and conceptions of intercollegiate athletics. We then examined the responses to these challenges in order to understand the gain further understanding of the organization’s institutional maintenance work. From this research, we endeavored to theorize the process of institutional maintenance work in response to various challenge typologies. As such, we sought to answer the following research questions: What were the primary challenges to the NCAA once it had established itself within intercollegiate athletics? How did the NCAA address these challenges? How did the responses to these challenges differ?
This study consisted of a historical case study wherein we utilized archival research methods to document the history of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S. We systematically collected and analyzed data from numerous sources to garner an in-depth understanding of the NCAA's governance of intercollegiate athletics (Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). Primary data sources included documents collected from the NCAA archives, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), the National Intercollegiate Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), and numerous secondary documents such as the dissertations of Flath (1963), Hoover (1958), Land (1977), and Wu (1997). These multiple data sources allowed us to address the primary weakness of historical research (i.e. reinterpreting history through secondary lenses) by triangulating the accounts of the authors (Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). In sum, we collected data that spanned nearly 90 years of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S. The data for this study were analyzed using the inductive grounded theory approach (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Initially, we sought to identify first order concepts within the data through open coding techniques. From these first order concepts, we identified second order concepts as themes within the data. Finally, we identified the aggregate theoretical constructs that addressed the purpose of this study and answered the driving research questions.

We found that the NCAA faced challenges originating from internal conflicts, legal and regulatory entities, technological advances, and from non-legitimate externalities. Various maintenance strategies were employed to address these challenges. Internal conflicts were addressed with ardent defense of the legitimacy of pre-established rules. When this strategy was insufficient, the NCAA would adjust its rules and structures to assuage the concerns of its diverse constituency. Legal and regulatory issues were addressed in a similar manner. Technological advances required substantial rule creation and adjustment until optimal arrangements were instituted. Finally, non-legitimate external challenges were largely ignored or were addressed through discourse defending the NCAA's legitimacy. From these findings, we developed a conceptual model that outlines the process of institutional maintenance work for addressing contestations that could result in substantial change.

This research offers valuable extensions to previous conceptualizations of institutional work. First, we provide a model that outlines the process of institutional maintenance work in response to various typologies of challenges. Previous research of maintenance work has generally treated all challenges as equal and not specified maintenance strategies based upon type of contestation. Secondly, our research suggests that institutional maintenance work may in fact consist of institutional entrepreneurship. This is interesting because previous research has generally confined institutional entrepreneurship to episodes of institutional change (see Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & MaGuire, 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Here we show that the NCAA was entrepreneurial in its maintenance efforts by making moderate adjustments to its governance to make its structuration and rules more responsive to the needs of its diverse membership (see also Washington, 2004). Finally, we heed the promptings of Washington and Patterson (2011) that called for expanding research of institutional theory in sport management. By invoking the institutional work perspective, we provide further understanding of "how dominant sport institutions stay in place" (Washington & Patterson, 2011, p. 10).