A Need for Data-Driven Decision Making: Perspectives on Advancing Theory and Practice in Intercollegiate Athletics

Erianne Weight, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Robert Malekoff, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Ellen Staurowsky, Drexel University
Richard Southall, University of South Carolina

Organizational theory/culture  Saturday, June 4, 2016  60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop
Abstract 2016-274  11:00 AM  (Legacy South 1)

Purpose

The purpose of the workshop is to explore opportunities for theory development and research-driven policy change through a discussion of current issues in intercollegiate athletics and gaps in the literature. In order to accomplish this, four researchers representing diversity in perspective will present the critical issues they have championed, engage the attending scholars and each other in discussion and debate, and discuss theoretical frameworks that can be extended through empirical research.

Foundational Literature

The role of athletics within American universities has been a topic of debate since the original union of varsity athletics and the academy (Desrochers, 2013; Ingrassia, 2012; Oriard, 2001; Smith, 2011; Thelin, 1996), but never has there been a time of such intense media scrutiny, litigious activity, and scholarly debate centering on the purpose, regulation, and administration of intercollegiate athletics. Born out of a unique moment in American history where athletics were heralded as a distinct vehicle for character development, the union of sanctioned athletics and the academy was endorsed by groups of faculty, administrators, and politicians in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Ingrassia, 2012; Rader, 1999). While education-through-sport was central to the rationale for intercollegiate athletics, additional (often conflicting) motives included fostering town-gown relations, generating revenue, and building institutional publicity (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Oriard, 2012; Putney, 2009).

Institutions have a central logic – a set of material practices and symbolic constructions – that determine what are acceptable and unacceptable organizing principles and operational means (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Southall et al., 2008). These logics are manifested as shared typifications and generalized expectations that allow institutional members to engage in coherent and acceptable activities. Internal institutional conflict results when competing logics are present. Such is the case within the institutional field of NCAA sport. Research surrounding the organizational practices and outcomes within intercollegiate athletics reflect these competing logics.

Positive athlete-centric outcomes of intercollegiate athletic participation have been documented including occupational marketability (Chalfin et al., 2015; Shulman & Bowen, 2011), cognitive development (Chaddock et al., 2011; Rosewater, 2009), enhanced personal self-concept (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009), discipline, dedication, sacrifice, leadership, ambition, teamwork, and work ethic (Center for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2010; Henderson et al., 2006; Long & Caudill, 1991; Weight et al., 2014). Conversely, claims that athlete academic interests hold primacy in the college sport enterprise are tested by the reality of special admission processes for athletes (Gurney & Southall, 2013; Miranda, 2014), the practice of academic clustering (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011), issues regarding rigor of courses taken by athletes who are graduate students (Solomon, 2015), diminished autonomy in course selection (Hardin & Pate, 2013; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2011), academic fraud (Smith & Willingham, 2015; Ware, 2015), and racial disparities in the educational promises that go unfilled for college athletes in the sports of football and basketball (Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013; Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Hartman, 2008; Polite & Hawkins, 2011; Smith, 2014; Staurowsky & Southall, 2015; Staurowsky, 2015).

The early hope of generating institutional publicity and revenue has been realized for some big time athletics departments in what is now a multi-billion dollar industry, but this institutional tolerance of commercialism and professionalism has come at the cost early reformers feared (e.g. Savage, 1929). College sport researchers, lawyers, and public policy makers have addressed myriad issues emanating from a college sport power structure that...
monopolizes profits to the detriment of the welfare of college football and basketball players, who Southall and Weiler (2014) refer to as “profit-athletes” including denial of fair compensation, (Jenkins v. NCAA, 2014; Marshall v. ESPN et al., 2014; O’Bannon v. NCAA, 2014; Rock v. NCAA, 2013), inadequate health care protections (Arrington v. NCAA, 2011, Doughty v. NCAA, 2013; Owens v. NCAA, 2011; Sheely v. NCAA, 2013), disputes regarding lack of due process (Branch, 2011; Byers, 1996; Carlson, 2015; Corman v. NCAA, 2015; Johnson, 2010; Oliver v. NCAA, 2009), and movements to attain employee status so as to access the opportunity to challenge unilaterally imposed rules on players without benefit of representation (CAPA v. NCAA, 2015; Hawkins, 2010a, 2010b; Nocera & Strauss, forthcoming; Sack & Staurowsky, 1996; Staurowsky, 2015; Staurowsky, 2014a, 2014b).

Because these issues have been brewing for decades, there is a solid foundation of scholarly work outlining the waves of reform and their philosophical underpinnings (e.g., Benford, 2007; Brand, 2006; Sack, 2009, Smith, 2009). In an effort to organize the ideologies from various reform movements and guide future research, panelists will ground their perspectives in established theoretical frameworks, and discuss research needs related to theory and policy development.

Panelist 1: True integration of intercollegiate athletics in the academy

Imagine how our history might have differed had the progression of athletics mirrored the development of music or dance within the academy. If athletics were truly integrated into our institutions of higher education as a discipline worthy of academic study, many of the issues that currently cloud intercollegiate athletics would dissipate. The segregated organizational structure in but not of the academy has been and will continue to be the primary source of conflict surrounding intercollegiate athletics in the United States. It is time for those in the academy to research and identify athletics as education, to hire, credential, recognize, and reward coaches as educators, and to embrace, facilitate, and measure education through athletics (Weight, 2015; Weight et al., 2015). This philosophical and organizational shift would address issues of academic capitalists and athlete rights activists (Brand, 2006; Sack 2009).

Panelist 2: Education for aspiring university leaders

College presidents are often expected to be all things to all people on their respective campuses and - at times - beyond (Hesburgh 2000; Resneck Pierce, 2011; Trachtenberg & Kauvar, 2013), so perhaps it comes as no surprise that higher education leaders are increasingly under fire for their oversight – or lack thereof – of intercollegiate athletic programs (Mooneyham, 2014; Zernike, 2013). A pertinent question is whether or not upon assuming their leadership positions presidents and other senior administrators know enough about college sports in the academy to provide effective supervision (Duderstadt, 2009; Shenouda, 2014; Woodhouse 2015). Given the need for effective oversight, it is useful to learn what aspiring college/university leaders know about inherent challenges presented by the contemporary college sports model, and – if deemed necessary – to develop programming that might better prepare aspiring presidents and senior administrators to oversee athletic programs in such a way that ensures their appropriate role in a higher education structure. This line of research would develop concepts of intellectual elitism (Sack 2009) and institutional logics theory (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Southall et al., 2008).

Panelist 3: College athletes’ rights as a matter of civil rights

The focus of this contribution will be on a consideration of research questions that flow from the understanding that college athletes’ rights are a matter of civil rights, the barriers that are constructed to deny athletes their rights, and the racial implications of those denials. From that, research questions flow: If college athletes are not accorded due process, how do decisions made in the absence of due process affect their value during a time of maximal value? If college athletes are employees in everything other than name, what price is paid in human capital as a result of that form of duplicity? If higher education is anchored in U.S. democratic ideals, on what basis is an elitist and exclusionary view of access as represented in any form of amateurism (mythical or otherwise), tolerable? What are the consequences of college athletes who participate in a system where they are routinely subjected to definitional subterfuge? This line of research would address athlete rights issues (Sack, 2009) and civil rights theories (e.g. Jonoski, 1998).

Panelist 4: The NCAA’s past, present, and future business practices

As is the case with all institutions, throughout its history, the NCAA has faced both internal and external threats consistent with what Greyser (2009) refers to as corporate/organizational/institutional brand crises. These crises
have included legal challenges, gambling and academic scandals, and periodic congressional inquiries. This contribution to the workshop will utilize three theoretical frameworks: a) institutional logics theory (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Southall et al., 2008; Southall et al., 2009), b) institutional propaganda (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013), and c) institutional rebranding (Southall, 2014; Southall & Nagel, 2015) to examine several NCAA rebranding initiatives, including: “student-athlete” (Byers & Hammer, 1995, Sack & Staurowsky, 1998), “Collegiate Model of Athletics” (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013), and Graduation Success Rate (Southall, 2014; Southall & Nagel). The panelist will propose increased examination of the NCAA’s past, present and future business practices utilizing the presented theories.