U Sports Competence: Analysis of Competencies Required for University Sports Canada (U Sports) Athletic Directors

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Intercollegiate athletics are a unique and integral part of North American institutions of higher education. Through competition and achievement, interuniversity athletics in University Sports Canada (U Sports) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is valuable to their member institutions. As a result, investment of time, energy, financial, and human resources are necessary within athletic departments. Given the Athletic Director (AD) is positioned as the leader of their department's hierarchical structure, he or she occupies a position of authority and decision-making. It is therefore important to understand competencies necessary for ADs to strategically manage their athletic departments.

Wernerfelt (1984) stipulates that resources are key to superior firm performance and serve as a potential source of competitive advantage. Here, the AD is classified under what Barney (1991) calls human capital, which is one of three categories of resources available to an organization. This study will analyze the AD as one of these resources and seek to better understand the competencies necessary for ADs, in Canada, to best perform in their role.

Over the past 30 years, an abundance of research on the NCAA has explored competency. For example, Cash (1983) studied the development of a competency-based model for individuals in athletic administration; Parker (1986) focused solely on NCAA Division I Athletic Directors, while Quartermann (1994) studied competencies required by athletic conference Commissioners. Researchers have also drawn comparisons between athletic directors overseeing different divisions (Neilson, 1989). Finally, literature exists around career progression in athletic administration (Won, Bravo, and Lee, 2012; Hardin, Cooper, Huffman, 2013).

Literature on the U Sports context includes internal and external influence around interuniversity athletics (Inglis, 1991) and perceived environmental control (Armstrong-Doherty, 1995). As well, Danylchuk and MacLean (2001) examined the future perspective of Canadian university sport, while more recently, Aughey, Danylchuk, and Lebel (2011) researched the impact of the economic recession on U Sports programs. Brand meanings of university sport in Canada have been examined by Chard (2013), as well as brand touchpoints between the athletic department and student-athletes (Chard, MacLean, & Faught, 2013). Danylchuk and Chelladurai’s (1999) work represents the only relatable research to the current study based within the Canadian context.

The purpose of this research will be to understand the core competencies required for U Sports Athletic Directors to perform their managerial activities within interuniversity athletics in Canada. Given that it has been 17 years since Danylchuk and Chelladurai (1999) presented the only Canadian study relative to ADs’ competencies, both researchers and practitioners alike should benefit from updated understanding in this area. For individuals in athletic administration, it is important to acquire and develop skills (competencies) to succeed in their vocational position. Recognizing that the athletic director’s role has undergone significant changes in scope, there is an increasing need to identify and update current competencies deemed relevant in athletic administration (Williams & Miller, 1983).

Athletic Director’s within U Sports Canada (specifically the Ontario University Athletics conference) will be invited to take part in semi-structured interviews; these individuals represent the highest level of executives in sport administration within Canadian intercollegiate athletics. Prazmier (1979) states, “the most appropriate sources of information for performance-based occupational preparation are the job itself and those closest to and most knowledgeable about the performance requirements on the job” (p. 31). A purposive sampling technique will therefore be used.
Inductive analysis of the job advertisements provided the researcher a general understanding of deemed competencies needed for Canadian university ADs. From here an interview guide incorporating these competencies (Financial, Marketing, Leadership and Experiences) was developed. Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, each interview will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The flexibility of this research tool helps to provide robust details that can be obtained from the collected data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Much of the previous knowledge of athletic administration has focused on the NCAA using a quantitative research methodology (Cash, 1983; Williams & Miller, 1983; Parker, 1986; Hatfield, Wrenn & Bretting, 1987; Neilson, 1989; Quarterman, 1994; Won, Bravo & Lee, 2012; Hardin, Cooper & Huffman, 2013). Literature on U Sports, and specifically research on competency development with this context, is scarce. Given this reality, more research is needed to elucidate and inform the Canadian context. Thus semi-structured interviews designed to capture ADs’ perceptions of the necessary skills and competencies needed to best perform in their role should aid in the advancement of knowledge in this important area of sport management.