Toward a Multi-Level Framework to Understand the Underrepresentation of Asian Americans in Professional Administrative Positions in Intercollegiate Athletics

Kristi Oshiro, Texas A&M University
John N. Singer (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Friday, June 2, 2017
1:50 PM
Room: Yale

Racial and ethnic minorities are expected to become 50% of the U.S. population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Asian American population in particular has displayed considerable growth in the United States, growing faster than any other racial group between 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Yet, this population remains largely understudied in the U.S. workplace and there is particularly a dearth of research examining the experiences of Asian American professional administrators in intercollegiate athletics (Shim, 2014). The 2015 College Racial and Gender Report Card for College Sport (Lapchick & Baker, 2016) indicated that across all college sport professional administrative positions (i.e., athletic directors, Associate/Assistant Athletic Directors, Senior Women’s Administrators, Sports Information Directors, and faculty athletics representatives) of Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools 1% or less were Asian Americans. And 4 of the 128 presidents at FBS schools were of Asian descent.

According to Museus and Chang (2009), Asian Americans are one of the most marginalized and misunderstood populations in higher education, and more work must be done to give attention to this population. They suggested the model minority myth surrounding the Asian American population serves as a barrier to their presence and advancement in various organizational settings, and contributes to the scarcity of research that focuses on this phenomenon. This myth assumes that all Asian Americans achieve universal academic and occupational success (Museus & Chang, 2009), and therefore, there is no need to focus on this population.

As the U.S. population continues to become more diverse, the contexts in which leadership occurs must also become more diverse (Chin, 2010). Doherty and Chelladurai (1999) expressed individuals are not clean slates when they enter an organization, but rather bring with them unique perspectives shaped by their culture and experiences. Due to the unique cultural values and qualities they have to offer, we suggest that Asian Americans can potentially serve as a valuable resource for sport organizations, and potentially provide a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991) to intercollegiate athletic departments. Inclusion of Asian American can also help create more organizational cultures of diversity throughout intercollegiate athletic departments, and encourage an increase of student-athletes from Asian backgrounds. As a result, cultivating organizational cultures of diversity can be advantageous to university athletic departments and on a broader scale, the institution as a whole (Singer & Cunningham, 2012).

The purpose of this presentation is to construct a multi-level framework to better understand the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in professional administrative positions of intercollegiate athletics. This framework will address factors at three levels: The macro-level (i.e., systemic racism in U.S. society), meso-level (i.e., institutional isomorphism, organizational cultures of similarity), micro-level (i.e., human and social capital). We will further explain each level and how it contributes to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in professional administrative positions in intercollegiate athletics. We will also elaborate on the potential intersectionality of these levels.

Macro-level factors focus on the broader historical, societal, and structural elements beyond control of individuals and the communities in which they reside. Singer (2005) argued sport management scholars should consider alternative race-based epistemologies, and advanced critical race theory (CRT) as an appropriate analytic and explanatory tool to better understand and address the challenges people of color in particular face in sport organizations. In response to this recommendation, we will apply CRT, particularly the AsianCrit version of CRT, to examine how systemic racism in U.S. society might impact the racialized experiences of Asian Americans and their absence in professional administrative positions in intercollegiate athletics. The AsianCrit framework provides a
separate set of tenets unique to Asian Americans, which can be useful for examining how racism affects their everyday experiences (Museus and Iftikar, 2013). One such tenet is strategic (anti) essentialism, based on the assumption that race is a socially constructed phenomenon, and dominant oppressive economic, political, and social forces influences Asian Americans in society (Museus and Iftikar, 2013). Shim (2014) suggested concepts such as the glass-ceiling and exclusion due to the race-based view of people of Asian descent as foreigners may create conflicts that inhibit the representation of Asian Americans in the workforce, and specifically intercollegiate sport.

Meso-level factors focus on the organization, and ways in which decision structures, and processes within it act to perpetuate the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in professional administrative positions in intercollegiate athletics. Drawing from the organizational theory literature, Cunningham (2008) argued institutional isomorphism occurs when entities within a given environment are likely to adopt similar institutional practices. For example, we assume institutional isomorphism contributes to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans by creating organizational cultures of similarity, which is dominated by majority heterosexual, white, able-bodied, males across intercollegiate athletic departments (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink, Pastore, & Reimer, 2001).

Micro-level factors represent those specific to the individual and his/her relationship and interaction with others. On the micro-level, we will focus particularly on the human and social capital unique to Asian Americans in the context of sport. According to Rosselli and Singer (2015), an individuals’ human and social capital or lack thereof could have an impact on their participation in certain sport and physical activities. Shim (2014) expressed there is an Asian cultural value placed more on educational pursuit and careers outside of sport. In turn, limited knowledge, interest, or effort (i.e., human capital) directed toward sport can contribute to the under-representation of Asian Americans in athletics administration positions. These individuals may also lack social capital (i.e., absence of peer, family, friends and other support networks) (Rosselli & Singer, 2015) within the realm of intercollegiate athletics.

Due to the rapid changes currently taking place in the U.S., sport industry leaders should act proactively to meet the demands of this shifting demographic. Failure to do so will lead to Asian Americans being an untapped resource for intercollegiate athletic departments. This multi-level framework has the potential to provide a robust explanatory framework for understanding the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in professional administrative positions in intercollegiate athletics. By understanding why this under-representation currently exists we can take the necessary action to deinstitutionalize this trend moving forward, and make intercollegiate athletics more diverse and inclusive, particularly within the leadership ranks.