Examining Ways Sport Organizations Attract Diverse Job Applicants: A Signaling Theory Perspective

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Sport organizations have increasingly recognized the benefits diversity and inclusion bring to the workplace, such as improved decision making, greater organizational performance and organizational creativity (see Cunningham, 2015a). To achieve these gains, many organizations have made concerted efforts to attract and retain employees with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. Nike, for example, states on its website that “We know the best ideas often come from unexpected places and our individual differences bring new perspectives to the table – so we are committed to fostering a workplace that is increasingly diverse and inclusive” (Unleash Human Potential, 2016, para. 4). Similarly, ESPN strives to “develop and retain talented people who represent our diverse global fans” and create “an inclusive environment where all employees can contribute to their fullest potential” (ESPN Together We Triumph, 2016, para. 2).

While more sport organizations are committed to fostering diverse and inclusive environments, this is not the norm (Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2010, 2012, 2015b). Instead, past research shows diverse sport employees continue to face prejudice and discrimination in the workplace, which negatively affects their interactions with coworkers, career opportunities, and mental and physical health (Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2010; Melton & Cunningham, 2012). Given these effects, researchers have devoted considerable attention to understanding the work experiences of women (Sartore, 2010; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003), racial minorities (Cunningham, 2010; McDowell & Cunningham, 2007), individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT; Melton & Cunningham, 2014), and ways to create more inclusive sport organizations (Cunningham, 2015b; Melton, 2015). Though much of this research provides meaningful insights on how to retain employees, less work focuses on strategies to attract diverse applicants. This is unfortunate considering (a) minorities continue to be underrepresented in amateur and professional sport organizations (Lapchick, 2015) and (b) sport organizations cannot reap the benefits of diversity and inclusion if they do not first hire people from a variety of backgrounds. Thus, this research uses signaling theory to explore the job search process for diverse applicants in the sport industry, and identify factors that influence their perceptions of the sport organization.

Signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973) suggests organizations use a variety of signals to convey information about their organization to external stakeholders. Drawing from social identity theory and signaling theory (Spence, 1973), Celani and Singh (2010) developed a multi-level model to understand how various types of signals—transmitted at the individual level (recruiter) and organizational level (organizational policies, demographic diversity)—affect perceived organizational attractiveness. They suggested information presented on company websites, recruitment materials, and recruiters signal information about the organization (e.g., values, culture). Relevant to this analysis, Celani and Singh contended that when applicants receive this information, their salient social identities influence how they process the signals and form perceptions of the organization. Cunningham and Melton (2014) observed similar dynamics in their study examining consumers’ intention to join a fitness club. Their findings suggested men and women perceived LGBT-inclusive advertisements to signal that a club is more diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, this signal positively related to certain female consumer groups’ intention to join the club, but it did not influence men’s intentions to join. It is also worth noting that signals can be intentional and unintentional (Connelly et al., 2011).

Given the aforementioned literature, we will use qualitative methods to examine the following research questions.

RQ1: What organizational signals (intentional and unintentional) influence job applicants’ perception of a sport
organization?
RQ2: How do various social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation) influence job applicants’ perception of a sport organization?

To examine these research questions, we will conduct semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of individuals who work within the sport industry. Currently, 15 people have agreed to participate in the study. The sample includes White men who identify as gay, Black men and women who identify as heterosexual, and White lesbians. Interviewing such a diverse group not only creates a robust sample, but also allows us to compare and contrast the perceptions of various minority groups and assess similarities or differences. Considering most of the diversity-related research focuses on women, racial minorities, and lesbians in sport, our findings will also add to the relatively scant literature regarding gay male administrators and staff. We will also use snowball sampling to ensure significant data saturation is reached.

Interview questions will be developed based on previous research regarding signaling theory and applicant attraction (Celani and Singh, 2011). Consistent with Lincoln and Guba (1985; Glense, 2006), we will also keep a reflexive journal to document our reflections during the data collection process. Finally, we will gather data from additional sources, such as outside articles and company websites. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data will be analyzed with NVIVO 10. In addition, we will use peer debriefers and member checks to enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

From a theoretical perspective, this study answers Connelly et al.’s (2011) call for researchers to examine if and how organizational signals are perceived by different groups. From a practical standpoint, this research has implications for improving the quantity and quality of diverse applicants in a sport organization’s applicant pool. Understanding what diverse applicants are seeking in a potential sport workplace can help sport organizations tailor their recruitment and hiring strategies, in addition to their organizational culture, in such a way that will encourage more of these types of individuals to apply for positions.