An Examination of the Present and Predictions for the Future of Intercollegiate Athletics

James Morton, Ithaca College

Management - Organizational Behavior (College Sport)  
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Over the past several years, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) has undergone significant change. This change has stemmed from two major sources: NCAA governance structure modifications and legal actions being pursued by current and former student athletes. In 2013, the NCAA formed a steering committee to recommend changes to the Division I governance structure (NCAA, 2014). The most drastic of the changes the committee recommended was granting autonomy to institutions in the Power 5 conferences (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pacific 12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference) to create policies related to the use of resources on student-athlete well-being. The autonomy allowed for an increase in money being spent on student-athlete centered initiatives by limiting the necessary votes, on this type of legislation, to members of these conferences, thereby blocking lesser resourced programs from voting down these cost-inducing initiatives.

The second major source of change has come from the legal sector. In 2009, Ed O’Bannon, a former men’s basketball player at the University of California at Los Angeles, brought a lawsuit against the NCAA asking for compensation for the use of his name and likeness in a video game (O’Bannon v. National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2014). In 2014, a judge ruled in favor of O’Bannon and ordered FBS member institutions to put money in a trust for football and men’s basketball players to receive upon leaving the institution; capping the number at $5000 per year per athlete (Dahlberg, 2014). Although reversed upon appeal, this lawsuit brought national attention to the idea of compensating student-athletes beyond just an athletic scholarship and inspired similar lawsuits brought by student-athletes against the NCAA, in an effort to have more of the resources generated by the NCAA and its member institutions allocated to student-athlete well-being (e.g., Keller vs. NCAA, Alston vs. NCAA, Jenkins vs. NCAA) (Litan & Keith, 2014).

Stakeholder theory holds that the organization is at the center of a network of relationships involving a diverse group of participants who will either help, or be helped by, the organization in accomplishing its goals (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Rowley, 1997). Further, it is necessary for an organization to identify its stakeholder groups and manage its relationships with those groups in order to be at its most effective (Freeman, 1984; Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004). Therefore, it becomes paramount for organizations to develop stakeholder management strategies. Stakeholders in intercollegiate athletics include student-athletes, students, prospective students, coaches, athletic department administrators, donors, faculty, alumni, fans, and community members (Dwyer, Eddy, Havard, & Braa, 2010; Wolfe & Putler, 2002). Once an organization has identified its stakeholders, it is important to assess how those relationships are impacted by an ever-evolving environment (Rowley, 1997; Xue & Mason, 2011).

The purpose this study was to assess how the granting of autonomy to the Power 5 conferences and the recent and current litigation facing the NCAA and its member institutions have impacted the economic, legal, and sociocultural sectors of the environment in which intercollegiate athletics operates and predict what the consequences of that impact will be over the next five to seven years. Additionally, the predictions were used to determine if the convergent approach (Jones & Wicks, 199) to stakeholder management is the appropriate approach for intercollegiate athletics managers. Having this information will aid the NCAA and its member institutions in evaluating the salience of their various stakeholder groups and whether or not those levels of salience align with the mission of the organizations.

The Delphi technique served as both the design and data collection method for this study. The purpose of using the Delphi technique is “to obtain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts” (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963, p. 458). Using this technique, an expert panel, consisting of 12 athletic directors and associate athletic directors from FBS institutions, was surveyed over three rounds to ascertain what issues are likely to occur over the next five to seven years and whether or not these issues will have a significant impact on the way intercollegiate
athletics operates. The first round consisted of an open-ended questionnaire, after which a content analysis was performed to identify the issues used to create an instrument for the second and third rounds. In the second round, panelists rated each of the identified issues on a 5-point Likert scale for likelihood to occur and for level of impact. For the third round, the panelists were sent the instrument again, this time with their score and the group score for each item, and then were asked if they would like to revise any of their ratings. For the sake of this study, consensus was defined as a median score above three for any item after the third round was completed.

The expert panel identified 20 total future issues based on their responses to the open-ended questionnaire used in the first round of the study. The issues were categorized as relating to either the economic, legal, or sociocultural sector of the intercollegiate athletics environment. The expert panel identified seven issues related to economics. Four of the issues related to economics reached consensus on likelihood to occur. All seven of the issues reached consensus for level of impact. The expert panel identified three issues involving the legal sector. One of the issues reached consensus on likelihood to occur. Two of the issues reached consensus on level of impact. Finally, there were a total of 10 issues identified that related to the sociocultural sector of the intercollegiate athletic environment, nine of which were related to the student-athlete stakeholder group. The panel reached consensus on the likelihood to occur for three of these issues. Consensus was reached for five of the items on level of impact.

The results of the study suggest that intercollegiate athletics administrators will need to focus on revenue generation and student-athlete well-being over the next five to seven years if they want to successfully adjust to the changing intercollegiate athletics environment. Specifically, it will be imperative for managers to concentrate on new ways to generate revenue in order to devote additional resources to the student-athlete experience. Further, the preponderance of issues related to revenue generation and student-athlete well-being, as well as how they were rated, support the use of the convergent approach to stakeholder management when it comes to intercollegiate athletics. By rating these issues in this manner, the panel is suggesting that in order to be effective, athletic departments will need to manage stakeholder relationships both for their economic value and their intrinsic value. Additional implications for practitioners, stakeholder salience, and future research ideas will also be discussed.