Career Boundaries and Professionalization of College Sport Fundraising and Development

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Fundraising and development has become an increasingly important skill and occupation within intercollegiate athletics (Kirkpatrick, 2018; Wong, Deubert, & Hayek, 2015). Recent research has shown that many top NCAA administrators have a fundraising background or actively perform that function (Hardin, Cooper, & Huffman, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2018; Lumpkin, Achen, & Hyland, 2015). As a profession, fundraising and development in college athletics is becoming increasingly well-defined with the National Association of Athletic Development Directors reporting a membership of more than 1500 professionals.

Wong (2013) refers to development as being “unique to the college athletics industry” (p.550), however, other industries employ people to undertake similar tasks such as political campaigns, nonprofits, hospitals, and other areas within education. O*NET, a US Department of Labor resource, shows that there are more than 150,000 jobs in the United States related to fundraising. The growing importance of athletic fundraising and development leads to a question of how unique this occupation actually is, and whether it should be considered a profession separate from similar nonsport occupations.

The purpose of this study is to examine the career history of people who currently or formerly held positions within fundraising, development, and closely related positions in intercollegiate athletics. Professions can be defined based on the required knowledge, expertise, and educational background, or through socially negotiated labels (Saks, 2012). Our approach will use Boundaryless Career Theory (Arthur, 1996) to examine the permeability of the occupational boundaries surrounding intercollegiate fundraising and development, which will speak to many of the factors (e.g., knowledge/skills, education, expertise) that either limit or help and encourage movement between certain positions, while also uncovering factors not previously considered.

This study will analyze patterns within hundreds of individual career paths containing thousands of data points using information gathered from publically available LinkedIn profiles. Following a method used by Odio and Kerwin (2017), we will code and examine career movements within and across several relevant boundaries, such as changing jobs between different institutions, divisions of the NCAA or NAIA, and changing jobs in and out of sports. The analysis will examine patterns related to these boundaries as well as the role of gender and educational background, while also producing statistics such as average job and organizational tenure in these roles.

The findings of this study will serve as context to inform future research and practice. In a comment on contemporary careers, Arthur (2008) advocated for an examination into several aspects useful for understanding a profession including identity development for people in the occupation, the existence and reach of networks, the influence of lifestyle and family, and external comparisons. By understanding patterns in job movements across careers, our analysis will provide an important layer of information related to this occupation that can lead to deeper quantitative and qualitative investigations regarding the knowledge, expertise, educational background and social factors and networks that can define a profession. From a more practical perspective, this knowledge can also inform professional development, training, recruitment, advancement, and retention strategies within individual organizations, and across the professional community.