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A case study of the diversity culture of an American university athletic department: perceptions of senior level administrators

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The topic of diversity has received considerable attention from scholars who study sport within the context of higher education in the USA. But despite this interest in the topic, an in-depth focus on how college and university athletic departments effectively manage diversity is missing from the literature. Therefore, we conducted an intrinsic case study of an American university athletic department in efforts to highlight its unique diversity culture (i.e. how it creates and sustains a culture of diversity and inclusion) and the potential impact this culture could have on its various educational stakeholders, and how they interact in this organizational or workplace setting. Findings from our qualitative case study with senior level administrators uncovered two major interrelated themes. First, this institution of higher education has a history and culture of valuing diversity, and this in turn has positively impacted the athletic department's commitment to diversity. Second, the integration of the athletic department into the broader university culture, particularly because of its organizational structure, has enabled this department to better embrace diversity and avoid some of the educational challenges many of its peers face. Research and practical implications are discussed in this study.

Keywords: Educational diversity; Structural diversity; Organizational culture; Diversity management; American college sport

Diversity has been defined as ‘the presence of differences among members of a social unit that lead to perceptions of such differences and that impact work outcomes’ (Cunningham, 2007, p. 6). Over the past few decades, the topic of diversity and its impact on people in various social and organizational contexts has received considerable attention and interest from scholars in various academic disciplines. Within the USA in particular, this focus on diversity could be attributed to several factors, including the changing demographic makeup of society and the workforce, legal mandates (e.g. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), social pressures, potential negative effects of diversity and the value-in-diversity perspective, among others (see Cunningham, 2007 for overview). Given the significant role colleges and
universities play in preparing students for career opportunities, leadership roles, citizenship and life in an increasingly diverse society, scholars have focused intensely on the benefits and challenges of diversity in higher education and suggested it has become increasingly important for these institutions to embrace diversity as they attempt to become microcosms of the larger society (see Astin, 1993; Smith, 1995; Bowen et al., 1999; Garcia & Baird, 2000; Gurin et al., 2002; Brown, 2004). In this regard, institutions of higher education could and should serve as an example and lead the way for other sectors of American society where issues of diversity and inclusion have become a focus.

Sport is one such sector where scholars have focused on the potential benefits (e.g. enhanced creativity, better decision-making and organizational performance gains) associated with diversity and the effective management of it (see DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999; Cunningham & Fink, 2006; Cunningham, 2007). More specifically and within the context of higher education, scholars have made some important theoretical and empirical contributions that provide keen insights into understanding and managing the diversity that exists within college sport in the USA (see Fink et al., 2001, 2003; Cunningham et al., 2006; Brooks & Althouse, 2007; Cunningham, 2008a, b, 2009a). Additionally, in efforts to capitalize on the benefits diversity could bring to college athletic departments, practitioners have paid attention to what scholars have said about the importance of diversity and diversity management. For example, in 2005, the late Myles Brand, former President of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), created the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, an arm of the NCAA committed to creating and supporting an inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes and career opportunities for athletics personnel from diverse backgrounds.

Sport management scholars and practitioners have engaged in important work that has contributed greatly to addressing the issue of diversity and inclusion within the context of college sport in the USA. However, although organizations such as the NCAA have implemented diversity initiatives and scholars have focused on what the ideal sport organization should look like in terms of diversity and diversity management, there has not been enough done to assess the diversity culture or how a university athletic department goes about or has been successful at creating and sustaining a culture of diversity and inclusion. Cunningham’s (2009a) field study of an athletic department at a major university in the USA is one of the few notable exceptions of in-depth research that has been done on diversity in college sport. Cunningham’s qualitative case study focused specifically on the diversity-related change process and what this particular department should do or consider in efforts to fully embrace and realize the benefits of diversity. Our current study aims to build on this important work by focusing on what one particular American university athletic department has actually done and is doing to create and sustain a culture of diversity and inclusion, and the benefits its various stakeholders derive from such a culture.
Given the cultural significance of athletics in institutions of higher education within the USA, the American college or university athletic department provides a unique organizational context through which to study sport and how a diversity culture manifests itself in this particular context. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to utilize major college sport in the USA as a cultural context through which to study a particular diversity culture in college sport, and discuss the implications it has for educational stakeholders. In the sections to follow, we provide a review of the literature that highlights the unique attributes of college sport in American society in comparison to other countries, and discuss the concept of organizational culture and its relevance to diversity management in college sport. We then discuss the methods used to carry out the study, and our findings. We conclude with a discussion of some research and practical implications from this case study of an American university athletic department.

**American intercollegiate athletics as a sport management culture**

Intercollegiate athletics in the USA is a phenomenon unlike that observed in other societies or cultures that also organize sport through institutions of higher education. In other countries, sport is not taken nearly as seriously, afforded such large operating budgets, or so embedded within the structure of universities (see Chu, 1989 and Beyer & Hannah, 2000, for overview of the historical development of college sport in USA). In fact, intercollegiate athletics has become such a prominent part of many American colleges and universities that some scholars and educators have expressed concern over the potentially negative impact it has on the mission, goals and academic values of higher education (Sperber, 1990; Thelin, 1994, 2007; Eitzen, 2003; Gerdy, 2006). Several reformed-minded groups have been created, and reports have been written since the founding of the NCAA in early 1900s to address issues (e.g. control, costs, equity, academics and certification) that impact the integrity of intercollegiate athletics (see Caughron, 2001 and Benford, 2007, for overview of college sport reform movements). Essentially, critics of intercollegiate athletics have argued and suggested that leaders in higher education (e.g. university presidents, faculty), as well as other internal and external stakeholder groups, must be involved in reform efforts because the emphasis on winning and commercial success, particularly in the big-time college sport programs (i.e. colleges and universities with athletic departments that have the largest operating budgets, major endorsement contracts with corporate sponsors, robust fan bases, highest media visibility and typically, the most competitive football and basketball teams), has usurped the focus on student development, academic performance and other educational values in these institutions of higher education.

Frey (1994) described these big-time college sport programs as subunits that can deviate from the organizational values of the colleges and universities of which they are a part. In the case of athletics in American colleges and universities, according to Frey, certain deviant acts (e.g. football practices held out of season that violate...
NCAA and conference regulations) have become acceptable or viewed by the athletic subculture as necessary to meet the goals of competitive success (i.e. winning championships and games). Frey’s (1994, p. 110) analysis of organizational-subunit relations reveals that athletic departments have a ‘strange alliance’ with the university that builds on its strong relationship or links to the external environment (e.g. boosters, media) to effectively resist control by internal university mechanisms; moreover, he insisted that the university structure, with a norm for subunit autonomy, further facilitates deviance and this is exacerbated by little structural dependence on athletics by other organizational subunits.

Beyer and Hannah (2000) provide support for and extend Frey’s (1994) argument. These authors embrace a cultural perspective in focusing on a few key aspects of college sport in American institutions of higher education. First, they focus on the intraorganizational competition that big-time college athletics engender. The authors suggest that the competition between athletics and academic values could be rooted in several historical factors, including the lack of consensus over the purpose of higher education in the USA, the pragmatism and utilitarianism embodied in American culture, and the lack of stable resources for institutions of higher education. Beyer and Hannah contend that the prominence of athletics in higher education arose because of these unique historical circumstances that made colleges and universities highly permeable to outside forces and influences. Because many of these athletic programs had the ability to attract external resources and publicity for these colleges and universities, many of these schools felt they could no longer survive or prosper as academic institutions if they abolished or downgraded their big-time college sport programs. This reality led many critics of college sport to argue that the social and commercial activities related to athletics began to overshadow the intellectual life for which the college or university is supposed to exist.

Second, Beyer and Hannah (2000) discuss how athletic events function as cultural forms—particularly as cultural rites; and many cultural ideologies are expressed by athletics. They contend that ‘cultures at any level have two major components: (1) sets of shared beliefs and values we refer to as ideologies; and (2) patterns of behavior that reflect those beliefs and values and are called cultural forms’ (see Trice & Beyer, 1993; Beyer & Hannah, 2000, p. 108). Beyer and Hannah argue that many aspects of intercollegiate athletics in the USA function as society. Athletic contests and competitions between opposing teams are major events (e.g. NCAA basketball tournament every March) that people from within and outside the college or university invest their time, money, energy and emotions in as fans, spectators, coaches, administrators, officials, athletes and other stakeholders; and certain cultural rites (e.g. press conferences with players and coaches) and rituals (e.g. routines of cheerleaders or dancers) become a part of the overall athletic event.

Beyer and Hannah (2000) contend that many of the cultural beliefs and values expressed by university athletic events are elements of cultural ideologies (i.e. ‘shared, relatively coherently interrelated sets of emotionally charged beliefs, values and norms that bind some people together and help them to make sense of their worlds’; Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 33) that characterize American society. In
particular, they view athletics, cultural ideologies and other aspects of culture as joint products of historical and social developments and situations. More specifically, the Protestant work ethic (achievement orientation and worthiness), capitalism (competitiveness, control and power, consumption, rationality and quantification), bureaucratic mentality (hierarchy, authority and subordination, obedience, specialization and technical efficiency) and collectivism (affiliative orientation, fair play and sportspersonship) are viewed by these authors as the ideologies symbolized in university athletics.

Finally, Beyer and Hannah (2000) discuss some positive and negative consequences that have been attributed to athletics at various levels of analysis. They suggest that both the positive (e.g. social cohesion and a sense of belonging to the diverse groups associated with a particular school) and negative (e.g. excessive amounts of money in athletic programs) must be considered when discussing the possibility of social change in college sport in the USA. But these authors caution that, given the pervasiveness of certain values in the American society and higher education, there is strong support for the status quo in college athletics. The cultural significance and the positive functions of college athletics makes any serious efforts at reform a daunting challenge. Indeed, given this reality, college sport in American higher education appears to be a unique sport management culture where the diversity culture of athletic departments and the impact this has on educational stakeholders could be vigorously studied. Below, we turn our attention to the literature on organizational cultures and diversity management in college sport.

**Organizational culture and diversity management in college sport**

The study of culture in the workplace has great potential to enhance our understanding of the structure and processes in sport organizations (Slack & Parent, 2006). The study of organizational culture gained traction in the 1970s because organizational theorists in the USA desired to make sense of the country’s declining economic influence and the growing strength of the Japanese economy and industries (Lee et al., 2004). According to Slack and Parent (2006), ‘it was not so much the cultural context in which Japanese organizations existed that caught and held the attention of organization theorists, but something that has been termed their “corporate culture”’ (p. 275), because these organizations operated using different values and beliefs, different norms of interaction and a different set of understandings from their counterparts in North America and Western Europe.

Although organizational culture is one of those terms that have been difficult for scholars to agree on a definition for, several definitions from the literature provide a basic understanding of organizational culture. For example, Pettigrew (1979) described it as an ‘amalgam of beliefs, ideology, language, ritual and myth’ (p. 572). Edgar Schein (1985), a pioneer in the study of organizational culture, defined it as ‘a pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal
integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be
taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to
those problems’ (p. 9). Sathe (1983, p. 6) described culture as ‘the set of important
understandings (often unstated) that members of a community share in common’. And for Wilkins (1983, p. 25), culture is ‘the taken-for-granted and shared meanings
that people assign to their social surroundings’. There are several general themes
within these different definitions, which include a focus on values, beliefs, basic
assumptions, shared understandings and taken-for-granted meanings on which a set
of individuals base the construction of their organization, and the various behaviors
and practices within it.

Understanding an organization’s culture also involves gaining knowledge of how it
was created, and how it is managed. A sport organization’s culture is something that
is developed and established over time, and typically, it is the founder or original
leader of the organization who establishes it and whose ideas tend to permeate
throughout the organization even after the founder is no longer around (Slack &
Parent, 2006). Once an organization’s culture is established, it has to be managed,
and when necessary, changed. But if the leadership of the organization has a desire to
maintain its culture, Schein (1985) detailed several things that could be done to
sustain and reinforce the organization’s culture. According to Schein, there are five
primary mechanisms: (1) what leaders pay attention to, measure and control; (2) leader
reaction to critical incidents and organizational crisis; (3) deliberate role
modeling, teaching and coaching by leaders; (4) criteria for allocation of rewards and
status; and (5) criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, retirement and
excommunication. Each of these mechanisms potentially has relevance to our focus
on the diversity culture of an American university athletic department.

We argue that organizational culture has a significant impact on various diversity-
related outcomes, particularly if the leaders of a organization value and embrace
diversity. In thinking about the diversity culture of an university athletic department,
the theoretical work of Doherty and Chelladurai (1999) is particularly relevant to our
discussion and study. These scholars argued that organizational cultures of diversity
(i.e. cultural diversity tends to be valued and supported), in comparison to
organizational cultures of similarity (i.e. cultural diversity tends to be suppressed),
are likely to enjoy more success than are their counterparts, particularly when that
culture is meshed with actual employee diversity (see Cunningham, 2009b for
empirical support). Similar to DeSensi (1995), Doherty and Chelladurai emphasized
that in organizational cultures of diversity, respect for differences, flexibility, risk
acceptance, tolerance for ambiguity, conflict acceptance, people orientation, future
orientation and equifinality are some of the values and assumptions; and two-way,
open communication, outcome-based performance appraisals, flexible, equitable
reward systems, multilevel decision-making and open group membership are some of
the manifestations of this type of culture of diversity. Fink and Pastore’s (1999)
framework referred to these types of organizations as being proactive in nature
because proactive sport organizations adopt a broad view of diversity and value
diversity to the fullest extent, have policies, procedures and practices aimed at
developing a diverse workforce, and are characterized by flexible organizational structures, open lines of communication and power shared by diverse persons (see Fink et al., 2001, 2003 for empirical support).

The literature on organizational culture and diversity management provides an important starting point for researchers interested in studying the organizational cultures of diversity (or similarity) in different sport organization types. Therefore, we decided to heed the advice of Doherty and Chelladurai (1999)—who suggested that researchers should profile or analyze these different sport organizations to build on the work that has been done—by focusing on the diversity culture of an American university athletic department. Because an organization’s culture is based on values, beliefs, accepted patterns of meaning and so forth, and because these things are difficult to empirically identify, researchers studying organizational culture should situate themselves in the organization they are studying (Slack & Parent, 2006). In this regard, we decided to embrace a qualitative approach to the study of the diversity culture of an American university athletic department by using methods that allowed us to dig and delve into the life of the organization and the people living out the experiences in that organization. Therefore, in the next section we discuss how we carried out our research in this particular organizational setting.

Methodology

Research design and setting

This study represents one specific case from a larger, ongoing body of work related to diversity best practices of athletic departments that are member institutions of the NCAA. The university and athletic department that was the focus of this study was one of a few recipients of an award that is given to athletics departments that exemplify excellence in diversity. In efforts to understand the intricacies of how diversity is managed in this particular athletic department, we employed an intrinsic case study approach (Stake, 2005). We were interested in the unique attributes of this particular university and its athletic department, and in illuminating the stories of those ‘living the case’ (Stake, 2005) or intimately involved in the operations and functioning of this organization. Moreover, because qualitative case studies of organizations involve a systematic gathering of information that could allow researchers insight into the life of that organization or particular aspects of it (Berg, 2001), we took this approach in efforts to assess the diversity culture within the athletic department at this particular university.

The athletic department is situated within a private university in the western portion of the USA. This university has been consistently recognized and ranked by the US News & World Report and other major publications as one of the leading research and teaching institutions of higher education in the world. It is known for its diverse student population at the graduate and undergraduate levels, particularly in terms of race, ethnicity and language. Undergraduate students come from all 50 states and more than 60 nations, and the university has eight individual community centers
aimed at providing support for and contributing to the holistic development of students from each of the racial minority groups on campus, international students, women, sexual minorities and people with disabilities. The university also has a Diversity and Access Office that was created to advance the university’s affirmative action goals and commitment to diversity, and the office works collaboratively with Vice Presidents, Deans, Department Chairs, Administrative Managers and Human Resource personnel across campus to ensure compliance with federal, state and local regulations concerning diversity and disability.

The athletic department is affiliated with one of the six major Football Bowl Subdivision conferences and would be considered a big-time college sport program with roughly 275 employees and a huge, multi-million dollar athletic endowment that funds athletic scholarships for varsity athletes. It offers a total of 36 varsity sports (19 women’s, 16 men’s and 1 co-ed). But unlike most of its peer institutions, club sport, intramural sport, open recreation, the university golf course, and the physical education program are firmly embedded within the organizational structure of this athletic department, meaning they are run and operated by the senior management team within the department. And despite this organizational structure, the various varsity sport programs have enjoyed success on the courts and fields of play, competing for and/or winning conference and national titles in several women’s and men’s sports over the past several years. In addition, several athletes have gone on to play professional sport (e.g. NBA, WNBA, NFL and MLB), and several coaches and athletes have found success at the Olympic sport level (e.g. swimming, wrestling). Finally, the varsity student-athletes’ graduation rates (consistently above 90% according to a senior level athletics administrator) and academic performance has consistently been ranked among the highest in Division I, big-time college athletics.

Participants and data sources

Participants for this study included several athletics administrators (i.e. the athletic director, deputy athletic director, six senior associate athletic directors and an assistant athletic director) and the director of diversity and access for the university. We interviewed senior level administrators within the athletic department and at the university level because: (1) the majority of them had hiring and major decision-making responsibilities; and (2) these individuals had the most intimate involvement with the diversity management strategies and practices of the athletic department, thus allowing us to garner a deeper understanding of the diversity culture. This final sample was comprised of ten participants, including five White males, two African-American males, one White female, one Asian female and one Hispanic female who is ‘partially sighted’ (see Table 1).

Both researchers interviewed each of these participants during a three-day campus visit. These semi-structured interviews lasted anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes in length, with questions focusing broadly on how diversity is defined, the most salient forms of diversity within the department, the diversity-related benefits and
challenges, strategies for creating and sustaining diversity in the workplace, and practical advice for nurturing an environment of diversity and inclusion in intercollegiate athletics. The majority of the interviews were audio recorded, and in those instances where they were not (e.g. participant was not comfortable being audio recorded, interview took place during a formal lunch meeting), the researchers took field notes. Moreover, it is also important to mention that field notes were taken even during those interviews that were recorded. All field notes were typed up by the researchers, and the audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. These field notes, transcribed interviews, and relevant documents (i.e. organizational chart, university and athletic department website material, brochures and other handouts) constituted the data sources for this case study.

Data analysis

Data analysis is a process because it involves an ongoing, continuous, evolving engagement the moment the first data are collected (Glesne, 1999). In this regard, our analysis of the data sources or ‘artifacts of social communication’ (Berg, 2001) commenced from the moment we began retrieving data before and upon our arrival on campus, even before we interviewed any of our participants. This approach allowed us to gather some baseline information and initial insights into the diversity culture of this institution, and helped to inform future data collection. Moreover, our formative theories (see LeCompte, 2000), or review of the literature on college sport, organizational culture and diversity management in sport organizations, helped to guide the development of our study’s purpose, and thus, our interview guide questions, and assisted us in our initial analysis of the data.

Analysis of the data from field notes, transcribed interviews and relevant documents began with the process of coding. Coding is a procedure that ‘disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments (categories and themes) and identifies and names those segments’ (Schwandt, 1997, p. 16). Ryan and Benard (2000, p. 780) described coding as the ‘heart and soul’ of analysis (particularly of text) because it forces researchers to make judgments about the
meanings of contiguous blocks of text. This data reduction was an important part of
the analysis because it allowed researchers to decide how the data would be mediated
or what story would be told about the diversity culture of this athletic department.

We were able to fully engage in the process of coding once all the data were
collected—that is, after completing all of our interviews and having them transcribed,
typing up our field notes, and collecting all relevant documents and materials we
were able to organize our data after leaving the field. This laborious process of coding
involved the researchers printing out the transcriptions of the field notes and
interviews and reading through them in efforts to form preliminary ideas and
insights into what the data were saying. Subsequent readings of the transcriptions by
the lead author involved a more intimate engagement with the data where a color
coding system was utilized to link the themes that were emerging back to the
literature and the major purpose of the study. Our transformation of this primary
data into the results we report in the next section was supplemented by our analysis
of the other data sources (i.e. organizational charts, websites information, handouts
given to us during our visit).

In efforts to make certain that the research process was rigorous and credible, we
engaged in certain activities. Specifically, with respect to ensuring credibility, we
relied on triangulation, member checking, and negative case analyses as strategies to
achieve credibility. In terms of triangulation of method or data sources (see Lather,
1986), we relied on interviews and document analysis as our methods of data
collection. Given that we knew we would have limited access to our interview
participants, we engaged in the process of member checking, a form of face validity
(Lather, 1986) that involves allowing participants to confirm their perspectives,
primarily during the interview process by reiterating certain questions and verifying
participants’ responses to the questions on a continuous basis. It was also helpful that
both researchers participated in the interviews and were able to take notes and ask
follow-up questions (for clarification or further insight) when deemed necessary and
appropriate. Finally, we also sought to engage in negative case analysis by searching
for any disconfirming data that might go against the primary themes that were
emerging. This serves as an important part of the research process because it keeps
researchers honest, and allows them to reflect further on the issues under study. We
will illuminate any negative cases we deem important in the next section as we report
the major findings from our study.

Findings

Our analysis of the data uncovered two major themes that speak to the diversity
culture of this particular athletic department at this American university. First, the
broader university in which the athletic department was situated has a history and
culture of valuing diversity, and this has influenced the various subunits’ within the
university, particularly athletics, commitment to diversity. And second, the integration of athletics into the broader university culture via some of the university policies and
procedures (i.e. admissions, residence life and judicial affairs), the organizational structure of the athletic department (i.e. inclusion of all levels of sport) and the important partnerships the department has established with the university (i.e. ‘Be Well’ initiative, department personnel teaching university courses) has greatly impacted the athletic department diversity culture, and thus, the developmental experiences of the student body and other educational stakeholders. These themes will be elucidated and expounded upon in the sections below.

Culture of valuing diversity

Because creating and maintaining an organizational culture of diversity begins first and foremost with the idea that employees of an organization must value diversity if it is to be properly managed (see Cunningham & Singer, 2009), we sought to uncover if and to what extent this was occurring at this institution of higher education and within its athletic department. According to Cunningham (2007), to the extent that people can show that diversity brings real, tangible benefits to a group or organization, the value-in-diversity hypothesis (see Cox et al., 1991) is likely to result in the greatest acceptance of diversity by group or organization members. Our interviews with various athletics department personnel revealed that the acceptance of diversity was the norm at the institution. The athletic director expressed how the emphasis on diversity in the athletic department ‘comes from the university’ and that ‘we are viewed as being an integrative part of the university’. The athletic director revealed that it was the culture of diversity at the institution that drew him to the athletic department. He stated ‘there were a lot of reasons for coming to [The University] but one of them is the culture here’. He described the university as being liberal and discussed how the university has a ‘great respect for divergent viewpoints’; and this includes the viewpoints of people from various racial and ethnic, ideological, sexual orientation and educational backgrounds, among others, that are represented at the university. In his mind, the diverse cultural environment of campus has helped the university build its stellar worldwide reputation. This environment has also helped the athletic department to better embrace these various dimensions of diversity.

In terms of how diversity is viewed more specifically at the athletic department level, several of the participants spoke about their concern and need for diversity to be valued. The assistant athletic director of human resources discussed how diversity is about ‘getting beyond compliance and making it a value’; it has to become a ‘value, and ethos’, and it cannot be about compliance or checking a box on some form. He further discussed how people must be ‘proactive’ and intentional in what they are doing in terms of dealing with diversity. This language is similar to that of Fink and Pastore (1999), who discussed the need for sport organizations to move beyond compliance and reactive strategies to managing diversity, and to embrace a proactive strategy if they desire to fully reap the benefits of diversity. In the eyes of several of our research participants, including the athletic director, a concern for diversity is a
part of the fabric of the university and athletic department; it is ‘how we do business’ according to one of the White male senior associate athletic directors (who played varsity basketball at this university in the 1980s and came back as an employee in 1993); and even though things like the facilities and infrastructure has changed dramatically from the time when he was a student-athlete there in the 1980s, ‘the people, the mission, the people themselves, they are very consistent’. Another White male senior associate athletic director insisted that when the athletic director came to the department he brought with him a focus on diversity ‘as a very strong value and many of our, nearly all of our decisions are made with diversity in mind’.

Other interviews with athletic department personnel provided support for the idea that diversity is desired and valued in this athletic department. For example, the White male senior associate athletic director who oversees development and does a lot of hiring (he has a staff of 12 people) discussed how what he:

wants as a manager is people to be working with me that brings things that I don’t bring. If I’ve got a bunch of people that bring the same things I bring, we’ve probably got a bunch of weaknesses cause I’ve got some…if I can hire some things that I don’t bring to the table we’re a better place because of it.

In particular, he stressed the need to hire individuals different from himself (i.e. non-White) who could help the office of development and fundraising with outreach efforts to various demographics. For example, he discussed:

we don’t have an African-American on the staff yet but I believe that’s about to change [he was planning to hire an African-American male former student-athlete who competed at the university] and I think…certainly we would be most effective in the work that we do as a team and as we outreach by having, especially in athletics where in athletics we have a greater percentage of African-Americans that participate in athletics than are at the university.

Interestingly, this sentiment that African-Americans are needed in the department if it is to have success in recruiting or reaching certain populations was expressed by other senior administrators. For example, the athletic director believes that ‘having African-American head coaches in football and basketball particularly is a good thing for a place like [The University] simply because we need to recruit nationwide and all those things’. He made this statement while reflecting on the difficulty he faced in deciding to hire a White head football coach who was ‘much more experienced’ than the African-American coach (a former player at The University) who was the other top candidate for the job. According to the athletic director, he struggled with the decision because he ‘really wanted to hire’ the African-American candidate but at the end of the day, ‘I just couldn’t quite get there and I expended a lot of stomach acid over it’. These quotes reveal that despite the outcome of this particular hiring decision, there appeared to be a genuine concern for diversity during this particular hiring process.

There was some further evidence that the hiring philosophy and practices of senior level managers in the athletics department reflected a culture that values diversity. For example, while our interviews revealed there to be a general concern
(particularly by the athletic director) about increasing gender diversity (i.e. hiring more women into coaching and administrative positions), there also appeared to be a concern and actual practice of hiring individuals from diverse functional backgrounds to fill various positions throughout the department. According to the deputy athletics director, the athletic department has a history of hiring people who do not necessarily have a background or a lot of experience working in the sport industry. In his words, ‘I think the best people that I’ve hired over the last fifteen years have been non, not all the best but, non-traditional candidates’. He made reference to how the directors of guest services, finance, and human resources all came from non-sport industry work backgrounds. As another example, the Asian female senior associate athletic director of external relations is an investment banker who came to the department with several years of work experience in the high tech software industry and only one year of experience working in sport prior to coming to the athletic department. Although some department employees certainly had sport industry work experience, the practice of identifying and hiring people with these diverse, non-sport work backgrounds has been the ‘secret to hiring in the department’ in the words of the deputy athletic director.

In addition to a focus on hiring employees from diverse functional backgrounds, there also seemed to generally be a proactive approach to hiring in the department. For example, the deputy athletic director stated, ‘I think that I never wait until people apply for the job. I mean I’m out searching for a sailing coach right now. I’ve talked to every, the top three sailing coaches in the country’. He discussed the difficulties associated with recruiting (or securing) these top coaches, and how the head coaches for the top 16 sailing programs in the country are all white males. It was his belief that there is a need for more gender diversity, and this belief is reflected in the thoughts he shared with us. In efforts to ‘find a female’ to coach in the women’s sailing program (they also have a co-ed sailing program), ‘I’ve gone down to the second level and found every assistant coach’. He further shared how instead of sitting back and waiting for ‘the applications to come in’ he went out and found a potential candidate by scouring the websites. He contacted a former student at The University to see if she knew of any strong candidates for the job, and also, to see if she would, herself, be interested in the job. Although things had not worked out with this particular candidate (as of summer 2008), this example is demonstrative of the proactive approach to hiring many of the hiring managers in the athletic department embrace.

Although there was a sentiment that the university as a whole was demographically diverse in terms of the racial and ethnic composition of students—(athletes), some participants felt there was a need for more diversity in senior level and upper management positions at the university and athletic department levels. For example, the director of diversity and access of the university—who initially met resistance from the university administration when she first came to [The University] to assist in its compliance efforts with federal disability law—acknowledged that the numbers were pretty high for staff positions (40% are racial/ethnic minorities; which could be due to the area of the USA the university is located in), but she insisted, ‘on the face,
we’re really diverse but when you look at senior management, you know I look at sort of the EEOC category managers, directors and the decision makers were not very diverse at all.

Similarly, although it was acknowledged by several participants that the athletic director places a heavy emphasis on improving gender diversity and ‘we’ve done such amazing things in terms of our women’s athletics and opportunities we’ve given’ (White female senior associate athletic director), there seemed to be a feeling that there is room for improvement in the area of racial and ethnic diversity. The assistant athletic director, an African-American male, stressed the need for athletic departments to be as direct and intentional in the recruitment of racial minorities for leadership positions as they are when they recruit athletes. He discussed the importance of African-American males being seen as role models in positions of leadership as a way to help combat the negative stereotypes against African-American males. He further stressed that senior leadership must be willing to take risks in hiring a qualified racial minority candidate (that might not work out) if they desire to make ‘diversity’ work. The African-American male senior associate athletic director echoed this sentiment when he insisted athletics departments should be serious about recruiting and paying diverse candidates, and suggested that embracing diversity is ‘not rocket science; it is not difficult to achieve diversity in athletics if you really make the effort’. These comments suggest that although the department has been proactive in their approach to recruiting and hiring diverse candidates, there is a need to continue emphasizing this, particularly as it relates to racial minorities in leadership positions.

One other interesting finding that provides somewhat of a challenge to the idea that this institution of higher education and its athletic department has a culture that values diversity is the perception that the institution is inaccessible to many people. The senior associate athletic director of development revealed that a negative perception with which they must contend is that the university is an ‘elitist school’ and is not accessible to a lot of people in the surrounding areas and communities. The assistant athletic director also mentioned how ‘intellectual elitism’ is a challenge with which the university (and western civilization) must grapple. This would suggest that despite the fact the university’s robust academic reputation allows it to recruit and attract a certain caliber of students (athletes), faculty, and staff from around the country and world, there is a need for the university to continue positioning itself as an inclusive, welcoming environment and provide more opportunities for a diverse array of people, particularly from different social class and racial backgrounds.

Diversity challenges notwithstanding, our findings related to this particular theme point to certain aspects of an organizational culture of diversity within the university and athletic department. This is critical because such a diversity culture serves as a foundation for diversity management strategies to be implemented. The next theme focuses on how the athletic department’s structure helps facilitate its strong alliance with the broader university culture, and the impact this has on diversity management.
Integration of athletics into university culture

Our findings reveal that the integration of athletics into the broader university culture is closely tied to the organizational structure (i.e. the divisions of labor, power and formal and informal relations and lines of communication through which regularities such as task allocation, supervision, and coordination are developed; see Jackson, 1987) of the athletic department at this institution of higher education. For example, the senior associate athletic director of physical education and recreation, who came from an Ivy League school, discussed how it ‘was the administrative structure that we have setup’ that attracted him to ‘The University. He was excited to reveal that he reports to the Provost of the university and to the athletic director. In his words, ‘I’ve got, on the one hand, an AD (i.e. athletic director) who understands our world in recreation and cares about it, and then I’ve got a Provost right now who’s really into wellness personally’. The athletic director’s background in recreation (i.e. he has a Masters degree in the field and practical experience) and Provost’s realization that sport, recreation, and physical activity could serve an important function in the educational development of the student body and wider university community, contributes greatly to these leaders’ commitment to embracing this current organizational structure.

This structural arrangement provided the ideal climate for members of this athletic department to interface with a broad array of diverse constituencies from within the athletic department and broader university community. Greater insight into this reality was revealed when one of the researchers asked the athletics director if he felt it was a good or positive thing that all levels of sport are merged together under one umbrella. In response, the athletic director submitted:

Well I think it is, and the only reason I do is I go back to the integration issue of our program within the university. We’re doing an initiative now that’s called [‘Be Well at The University’]. There were five organizations on campus that were delivering lifestyle training and that sort of thing and doing health assessments and that sort of stuff. Our director of recreation, he’s our senior associate athletic director… he’s really been the prime mover behind this ‘Be Well at The University’ initiative and it’s a campus wide student, faculty and staff wellness initiative… he’s (the director of recreation) it on behalf of the university and you’ll see signage around campus and it encourages people to go get a health assessment. We’re actually paying people one hundred and fifty dollars to go and have a health risk assessment and then get involved in eating well, reducing stress, and being fit. We think it will make for a more energetic workforce and a lower group insurance expectation and it really has come from within our department in collaboration with these other entities on campus; but I think it is a good example of how we’re sum and substance of the greater university, not an entity off by itself…

The mission of this wellness initiative is to create a healthier university by developing a culture of wellness that reaches every person on campus. In reflecting on his motivation to develop the ‘Be Well at The University’ initiative, the director of recreation discussed how he wanted to ‘create a culture of cultural awareness’ at the university. Moreover, he desired to breakdown the ‘many great silos’ at the
university, and build partnerships with people across the various departments on campus. The high participation rate of people from across campus is indicative of the success the athletic department has had in using this initiative as a way to integrate the athletic department into the broader university. Indeed, our research reveals that this initiative has been extremely helpful to the athletic department’s efforts to connect with a broad array of educational stakeholders across campus.

Another major example of how the athletic department is ingrained into the fabric of the broader university culture is that certain policies and guidelines are in place to integrate varsity athletes into the general student body. Unlike a great many of their peer institutions that compete at the big-time, Division I level, the varsity athletes at this university are not isolated from the rest of the student body, and generally do not receive special treatment. Varsity athletes are truly viewed and treated, first and foremost, as students. This reality is captured in the words of some of our research participants. In comparing the varsity athletes at this institution to the ones at the Ivy League school he worked at before coming to [The University], one of the senior associate athletic directors stated, ‘One thing I would say which I’ve really liked about [The University] experience is that the student-athletes are really respected here for being students as well as athletes’. The athletic director stated there is ‘an equal priority for academics as there is for athletics, and probably a more significant priority for academics’. Further corroborating these comments from above are comments made by one of the senior associate athletic directors who played basketball at [The University]. In discussing how the culture has changed since he was a student-athlete there in the 1980s he stated:

I think the biggest thing that stays the same is that we as an athletic department firmly believe that our student-athletes are students first. It’s been that way forever, you know there’s been a couple of changes that we worry about I mean just because things that are needed to help student-athletes. For example, we have begrudgingly, we have some tutors that are in our, the athletic, academic resource center. We also have two advisors that are actually university employees. They are part of the university undergraduate advising program. They’re actually stationed in the rec center to work with student-athletes. So they’re not really, they’re not athletic department employees but they are servicing student-athletes so that was kind of a strange, we don’t want to separate the student-athletes from the students. And that goes back to when I was a student here.

This senior associate athletic director offered even more insight into how varsity athletes are viewed as students first at [The University]. For example, in discussing judicial affairs, he stated, ‘if the student-athlete gets in trouble with, be it a problem in the dorm or a problem in an honor code situation, the university deals with that’. He discussed how the athletic department refrains from intervening in the process, and insisted, ‘It’s a university process; you’re a student. If you screwed up, you know, we’ll try to help support you but you gotta go through the process’ because ‘they’re students first and they happen to play a sport’. He offered even more interesting examples of how athletes are seen as students first. According to this research participant, beyond the fact that athletes are randomly assigned (and not with other
to the dorms with the general student body, ‘they don’t have priority registration’ and ‘they eat in the dorms’ because the ‘undergraduate education component for the students [varsity athletes] to be sitting and eating with the other students is a huge part of The University process in the educational development’ of students.

However, he did acknowledge that in efforts to keep up with their peer institutions in competing for the top recruits in the varsity sports, ‘we finally begrudgingly put our head count sports on training table’, meaning the athletic department provided separate meals for athletes in these sports to dine together (apart from the general student body) as a team. He gave the impression that the athletic department might be losing some of the best and brightest athletes in these head count sports (i.e. sports where athletes receive either a full ride or no scholarship support; football, men’s and women’s basketball, women’s volleyball, women’s tennis and women’s gymnastics) to their major competitors because these institutions have over the years regularly offered training table privileges for their athletes in these sports.

Another research participant offered yet another tangible example of how varsity athletes have been integrated into the broader university culture. In particular, the White female senior associate athletic director, who serves as the senior women’s administrator and the main liaison between the athletic department and the undergraduate admissions office, provided keen insight into how the admissions process for elite varsity athletes works at [The University]. She discussed how she has taken on this ‘constant liaison role’ because the admission process for athletes at [The University] is a ‘much different structure for that than for any other Division I institution’, When asked to elaborate on how this is so she stated, ‘Well, some of it is our process so the students have to complete the full application that all students have to complete. It’s reviewed by the admissions office in the exact same manner, read by multiple individuals that are not just athletics focused’. She did mention how coaches are allowed input into the process in terms of providing their thoughts on how the student-athlete fits into the athletic program as well as the broader university. She also remarked, ‘The only change really for our student-athletes in recruiting is the time line because they have to accommodate the national letter of intent. So they will read them in a different time frame than they read the regular student population, but the process itself is the same’.

She also stressed how coaches are allowed to extend and sign letters of intent (i.e. athletic scholarships) to recruited athletes only if those students have been approved by admissions. This prompted one of the researchers to ask her about whether or not there are ‘special admits’ (i.e. students who do not meet certain prerequisites or criteria for admission still being granted admission) at [The University]. In response, she stated:

No. The university itself does not have any minimums for decisions so there’s not a minimum SAT, not a minimum GPA; in fact, you actually technically don’t have to be a high school graduate to be approved for admissions for The University. So there’s really no special admits under that case because there’s not a floor. It’s fairly reasonable when you look at the general population from the group. I mean it’s very
selective. They take, this year they took twenty four thousand applicants for classes of about two thousand so it’s obviously incredibly competitive and so when you’re looking at three kids from the same school and this one’s the valedictorian, and this one’s 3.5, and this one’s 2.8; well, it’s gonna be hard not to take the valedictorian, but if that 2.8 kid has already done incredible research in science and is very gifted somehow as a 2.8 they’re still gonna get a look.

This quote demonstrates that although [The University] has a competitive admissions process and only accepts a small percentage of its applicants on an annual basis, it appears that measures are in place to provide opportunities for those students (including varsity athletes) who have great potential academically and beyond.

Finally, the integration of the athletic department with the broader university is also evident in the fact that many of the coaches and administrators regularly teach university courses offered to the general student body. This model is something that most athletic department with big-time college sport programs have moved away from as college sport has become more commercialized in the past couple of decades. However, at this university it is not uncommon for coaches and administrators to teach, in addition to their regular duties. For example, the African-American male senior associate athletic director is a former NFL running back who teaches one of the physical activity classes; he utilizes some of the workouts from his playing days as a basis for teaching this class; and this class has become widely popular with the student body. As another example, one of the swimming coaches, a former swimmer at [The University] and Olympic Gold medalist, who also won the National championship during her time as a member of the swim team, teaches a beginning swimming class. And yet another example is the women’s basketball coach, who is considered to be one of the top coaches in her profession; she teaches one of the physical education classes. The deputy athletic director, who teaches a two-hour lecture course offered by the department, discussed how ‘our soccer coaches teach soccer classes to the undergraduate population; I think it’s good for them. I think all those kids are at every one of his soccer games; I guarantee it’.

Taken together, the comments above speak to the efforts made at [The University] to ensure that varsity athletes are indeed students first, not just elite athletes who are segregated from the rest of the student body. Despite the fact that this athletic department might face some similar challenges as their peer institutions, unlike many of its counterparts with big-time college sport programs, this athletic department’s organizational structure and integration into the broader university allows it to create and sustain a culture that values diversity in sport and higher education.

Discussion and conclusion

We sought to study the diversity culture of one particular athletic department by examining the ways in which it creates and sustains an organizational culture of diversity, and the impact this has on the various stakeholders served by this athletic department. Our findings suggest that the university’s history and culture of valuing diversity has a positive impact on the athletic department’s commitment to diversity.
and inclusion. Further, the organizational structure of this athletic department serves as a major catalyst to its integration into the larger university culture, and this has allowed the department to better embrace diversity and avoid some of the educational challenges and pitfalls faced by many of its peer institutions. Below, we discuss the contributions of this study, its limitations, and future research directions.

There are some meaningful contributions worthy of discussion. As mentioned at the outset of this article, there is an abundance of literature that has analyzed and critiqued the marriage between higher education and big-time college sport in the USA, insisting that an overemphasis on competitive and commercial success has compromised the integrity of college sport at this level, and caused athletic departments to become disengaged from the missions, goals, and academic values of the wider university culture. Frey (1994) described these types of athletic departments as ‘deviant subunits’ of the university, and attributed this deviance, in part, to the university structure because it has a norm for subunit autonomy. Findings from our study suggest this is not the case with this particular athletic department. The integration of athletics into the broader university culture has allowed it to create a culture where varsity athletes are immersed in meaningful diversity experiences with various groups throughout the campus community, and therefore, exposed to a broad, diverse array of people and learning experiences. Gurin et al. (2002) referred to these important educational experiences as informal interactional diversity, where students find themselves engaged in informal discussions, daily interactions in the residence halls, and other campus activities with diverse (racially and otherwise) peers. Gurin and colleagues’ research on diversity in higher education has shown that the experiences students have with diversity consistently and meaningfully affect important learning outcomes (e.g. intellectual engagement, active thinking) and democracy outcomes (e.g. racial and cultural understanding, citizenship engagement) for students in diverse campus environments. The diversity culture of the university in our study appears to be an example of such a campus environment that contributes to the educational experiences of the athletes in the department.

Although varsity athletics is a highly visible, major aspect of the athletic department in our study, concerted efforts have been made to make varsity athletics an integral part of the broader university culture. In an interview with the President of Northwestern University—which is a member of one of the major athletic conferences and private institution of higher education with a similarly strong academic reputation as the university that was the focus of this study—Richard Wolfe (2000) asked the President for his thoughts on what could be done to create more positive interactions between athletics and the rest of the university community. In response, the President compared his athletic department to that of Ivy League schools (e.g. Princeton University), and discussed how his institution and these types of schools have taken on the challenge of maintaining a culture where varsity athletes are viewed and treated as members of the student body. The athletic director in our study also likened his athletic department to an Ivy League model, and suggested
that this has helped them to stay in alignment with the missions, goals and educational values of the broader university. This model, which has an alternative organizational structure, is rare for Division I athletic departments competing at the highest level of big-time college sport.

The organizational structure of this athletic department is quite distinct from that of most of its peer institutions, and this alternative structure contributed greatly to its diversity culture and ability to serve the needs of its students and other educational stakeholders. Organizations that adopt a broad view of diversity and value diversity are characterized by organizational structures that are flexible in nature (Fink & Pastore, 1999). Athletic department leaders in this organizational culture have demonstrated a willingness and desire to pay attention to the diversity of the sport programs and services they offer (i.e. varsity sport, club sport, intramural sport, open recreation, the university golf course and the physical education program), and the various stakeholders they serve, in such a culture. Such an organizational culture provides myriad educational and potential work and career opportunities for employees and participants from diverse backgrounds. This is extremely unique for athletic departments that compete in today's highly competitive, big-time college sport landscape. Based on the findings from our study, it appears that this athletic department operates using different values and beliefs, norms of interaction and a different set of understandings from their counterparts who also are affiliated with big-time college sport in America.

Finally, though not a central aim of this study, examining how the athletic administrators defined diversity is of interest. As mentioned at the outset of this paper, researchers have defined diversity using very broad, inclusive language, such as the ‘presence of differences’ (Cunningham, 2007, p. 6). Such a perspective does indeed allow for various differences to be subsumed under the diversity construct. In this study, we did not offer a definition to participants, but instead, asked them how they thought about diversity. Through their responses and further discussions of how diversity impacted this work setting, it became evident that they focused (perhaps implicitly) on race and gender, with less focus on other diversity dimensions. This pattern is consistent with Tsui and Gutek’s (1999) contention that ‘in practice diversity often refers to “women and minorities”; that is, sex and race have been the focus of diversity efforts’ (p. 3). Thus, there appears to be a disconnect between scholarly and practical conceptualizations of diversity. Perhaps future research is needed to understand how these varying conceptualizations impact subsequent diversity-related attitudes and behaviors.

**Limitations and future directions**

Despite the contributions of this case study, there are some limitations worth noting. In particular, our access was limited to senior and mid level athletics administrators and the chief diversity officer at the university level. Although these participants certainly provided invaluable information concerning the university and athletic
department diversity culture, the voices and perspective of coaches, athletes, and other athletic department employees, as well as other educational stakeholders of the university (e.g. faculty, students, president, provost and alumni), would have given us a more comprehensive look into the diversity culture of the university and athletic department. We spent three days on campus; perhaps if we were given greater access to a broader sampling of the various educational stakeholders at this university, we could have spent more time in the research setting. Prolonged engagement in the field would have made it possible to interview these different stakeholders, as well as gain additional insight from the ones we did have the opportunity to interview.

Given the limitations and the findings from our study, there are some potentially fruitful avenues for future research. First, longitudinal, ethnographic case studies of college and university athletic departments similar to and different from the one in this study could provide important insight into how diversity impacts the educational experiences and outcomes of student-athletes in these various college sport settings. Second, more in-depth research should be done to assess athletic department leaders’ commitment to diversity. In his work on commitment to diversity in college athletics, Cunningham (2008a) discussed the critical role athletic director’s play in setting the culture and establishing the norms of the department. Future research should build on this work by continuing to test the various scales Cunningham created to assess the diversity mindsets of leaders; but also, qualitative studies should examine the multidimensional aspects of this commitment.

In conclusion, although there is a need for future research on the organizational culture of diversity of this particular athletic department as well as other NCAA member institutions across all three divisions, this intrinsic case study allowed us to glean insight into how one particular athletic department has been successful at making diversity work, and the positive impact this has on its educational stakeholders.

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References


