

# A case study of the diversity culture and practices in an intercollegiate athletics department

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## Aim of paper and research questions

The management of diversity in major college sport has received a great deal of attention from scholars and practitioners; as a result, there is a need for in-depth studies into what diversity management practices and processes intercollegiate athletics departments engage in, and how they go about creating and sustaining a culture of diversity and inclusion. In this regard, the purpose of this study was to examine one particular athletic department's diversity culture (i.e., organisational structure, human resources and personnel, values, attitudes, and beliefs) and related practices.

## Literature review

Several scholars who study diversity in sport organisations, particularly big-time (i.e., large budgets and high media visibility), division I intercollegiate athletics in the United States (USA), have made important theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature on strategies and tactics for managing the cultural diversity that exists in these organisations (Brooks & Althouse, 2007; Cunningham, 2008; Cunningham, Bruening & Straub, 2006; Fink, Pastore & Riemer, 2001).

## Research design and proposed data analysis

We choose to employ an intrinsic case study approach because we desired to better understand this particular athletic department, not because it represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem (Stake, 2005). Instead, we were interested in the uniqueness of this athletic department, and in illuminating the stories of those "living the case". Because organisational case studies involve a systematic gathering of information that could allow researchers insight into the life of that organisation or particular aspects of it (Berg, 2001), we took this approach in efforts to glean insight into this particular athletic department's diversity culture and best practices.

This athletic department was specifically chosen because of a) its racial, ethnic, language diversity within the student population, including student-athletes (student-athletes hail from at least 47 of the 50 states in America, as well as Washington DC and 10 foreign countries), b) its high academic standards and consistently high rankings in regards to the quality of its academic programs and students (the graduation rates for the general student body as well as for student-athletes is over 90%), and c) its tremendous success in athletics year in and year out. The athletic department serves more than 800 student-athletes representing 35 varsity sports—19 for women, 15 for men, and one co-ed, and has consistently competed for national championships and conference titles in several of its varsity sports.

Our primary method of data collection consisted of semi-structure, individual interviews with several athletic department senior administrators and a few other athletic department and university personnel during our visit to campus. In addition to our analysis of the transcribed interview tapes, we also collected and analysed information from relevant documents such as organisational charts, brochures and other handouts, and information from the university and athletic department websites. Our analysis of the data continues to be an ongoing process that involves an independent and collective effort by the researchers to identify patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### Discussion of progress

Preliminary findings from this study reveal that the organisational structure and certain organisational practices greatly contribute to the uniqueness of this athletic department's diversity culture in comparison to many of its counterparts. First and foremost, the fact that varsity sport, club sport, recreation and intramural, and physical education programs are all housed within the athletics department allows for the athletic department to be more fully integrated into the wider, diverse university community. This integration of what Jay Coakley (2007) refers to as the power and performance sports model (i.e., highly organised and competitive) and the pleasure and participation sports model (i.e., focuses more on connections between people and on personal expression through participation) into a single athletics department has allowed this sport organisation to serve the interests of a broader array of stakeholder groups from widely diverse backgrounds.

The delivery of these various sport programs to multiple stakeholder groups within and outside of athletics (e.g., coaches teaching activity courses in the physical education program; health and wellness initiative aimed at faculty, staff, and students) certainly speaks to the unique diversity culture and associated practices within this athletics department.

This paper will elaborate upon these preliminary findings as well as other pertinent findings related to the diversity culture and practices within this athletics department, and discuss the implications this research has for sport management scholars and practitioners.

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