Examining the Effects of Institutional Maintenance Work on Institutionalization in US Athletic Departments

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Institutional work has become an increasingly popular framework in the sport management literature (see Agyemang et al., 2018; Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Nite, 2017; Nite et al., 2019; Nite & Nauright, 2020; Nite & Washington, 2017; Woolf et al., 2016). Indeed, sport management scholars have examined the practices that impact the creation, maintenance, and disruption of sport institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). For example, Nite and colleagues (2019) outlined the different forms of work that allowed the NCAA to remain dominant in US amateur sport. However, research has yet to show empirical relationships wherein concerted actions are related to the institutionalization of rules, structures, and cognitions within given sport settings (Nite & Edwards, 2020). Our research seeks to remedy this shortcoming.

With this inquiry, we focus primarily on institutional maintenance work, which “involves supporting, repairing, or recreating the social mechanisms that ensure compliance” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, pg. 230). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) offered two broad categories of institutional maintenance work: creating and enforcing rules and reproducing norms. Generally, sport management scholars have shown the mechanisms of creation and reinforcement of rules and norms. For instance, the work of Nite and colleagues has shown how the NCAA had created and altered rules to maintain its dominance (Nite et al., 2019; Nite & Nauright, 2020; Nite & Washington, 2017). Similarly, Edwards and Washington (2015) showed that creating new rules that were acceptable in multiple contexts was important for maintaining hockey programs in Canada. Finally, Woolf et al. (2016) and Nite (2017) detailed how sport institutions reinforce normative expectations through discourse and routines. However, scholars have yet to provide empirical support showing that maintenance actions are indeed related to institutionalization.

Our aim is to provide support for the notion that institutional maintenance work is empirically related to institutionalization. We hypothesize that institutional maintenance work will be related to institutionalization and that the relationship will be moderated by legitimacy perceptions. Currently, data are being collected using Qualtrics surveys from US university athletic department stakeholders (i.e. athletic administrators, coaches, athletic donors, fans, and former athletes) regarding athletic department policies that are designed to control college athletes’ behavior. We drew upon institutional maintenance research to develop scaled items for each of Lawrence and Suddaby’s (2006) categories. We minimally modified previous scales of legitimacy (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019) and institutionalization (Singhapakdi & Vitell, 2007), as they have already established validity and reliability. Analysis will be completed using structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine the direct relationship between institutional maintenance and institutionalization, while also examining the moderation of legitimacy between those two constructs.

Our research offers important contributions to sport management. Whereas, previous research has been confined to descriptive accounts of the forms of institutional maintenance and has inferred the relationship between institutional work and institutionalization, we intend to provide empirical evidence supporting the relationship between institutional maintenance work and institutionalization within sport settings. In this regard, we offer a key step in the theoretical development of institutional work within sport management.