The Summer of Racial Injustice Awakening and COVID-19: Investigating the Experiences of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Professionals in College Athletics

Nicholas Swim, University of Louisville  
Robert Turick, Ball State University  
Yannick Kluch, Rowan University  
Raquel Wright-Mair, Rowan University

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Since March, two dramatic events have impacted the future of college sport. First, a global pandemic due to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) halted all sport activity, with little hope of restoring typical competition in the near future. Second, the nation witnessed the horrific murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (amongst others). The increasing number of murders of African Americans/Black populations at the hands of law enforcement brought to light heightened discussions on race, police brutality, and social injustice in a new wave of racial injustice awakening. These conversations permeated into college sport, where an increasing number of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals act as liaisons between student-athletes, coaches, athletic leadership, campus leadership, outside stakeholders, athletic conferences, and the NCAA to promote more inclusive environments in sport. This past August, NCAA membership adopted legislation mandating each institution to appoint a DEI designee to serve as a conduit for DEI information and practices across the athletic department (Dent, 2020).

While DEIs working in athletics can help create effective teams and workplaces, Cunningham (2015) highlighted the lack of commitment from athletic department leadership to implement substantial change and the importance of creating an inclusive departmental culture. Often, diversity policies act more as a free-standing narrative, rather than creating actual organizational culture change (Brayboy, 2003). In sport, Spaaij et al. (2018) argued most diversity work occurs accidentally or as reaction based on external and internal pressures. Further, without substantial support and commitment from organizational leadership, diversity initiatives fail to create the needed and intended changes (Spaaij et al., 2018). Furthermore, diversity officers may only be guides rather than drivers in institutional change (Griffin, 2019). As such, the purpose of this study was to understand the changes in the workplace of collegiate athletic departments and the fallout of these changes on DEI professionals during the 2020 racial injustice awakening and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher(s) utilized purposive and snowball sampling to identify athletic administrators with DEI job responsibilities. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with 23 DEI administrators across all three NCAA divisions (DI: n=12; DII: n=3; DIII: n=6), one conference official (n=1), and national governing body representative (n=1), the researcher(s) identified five higher-order themes through open and axial coding of the data: (1) increase in the number of DEI programs, (2) increase in departmental engagement with DEI, (3) calls to action by individuals in athletic department, (4) emotional fatigue, and (5) the power of DEI work in athletics. Results indicated DEI professionals in college athletics faced unique challenges at both the personal and institutional levels. Participants also viewed the intersection of multiple crises in the summer of 2020 as a platform to drive home the importance of DEI to the athletic experience. As the sports industry generally, and collegiate athletics in particular, continues to navigate the multiple pandemics, the findings of this study help identify barriers and opportunities to effective DEI work and provide implications for driving inclusive excellence in the context of intersecting global crises.