Book Review

Who Calls the Shots? Sports and University Leadership, Culture, and Decision Making: Ashe Higher Education Report, Vol. 30, No. 5

Edited by Suzanne E. Estler and Laurie Nelson,
Jossey-Bass, April 2005;
ISBN: 0-7879-8076-5; 152 pages

International Journal of Educational Advancement (2006) 6, 264–266.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150021

In *Who Calls the Shots?: Sports and University Leadership, Culture, and Decision Making*, Suzanne Estler and Laurie Nelson examine the decision-making process at colleges and universities as it relates to athletics. As college athletics seems to be more “big business” than a part of the academic mission of a university, this book is a timely critique of where athletics has been and where it is going. On a more general level, the authors assert that by looking at athletics as the first attempt of higher education to fund its business externally, lessons for all realms of university decision making can be learned about how to best marry the academic mission of the university with the demands created by external funding.

Touching on the history of college athletic governing bodies, race and gender issues, and the influence of

alumni and the media, Estler and Nelson give the reader a glimpse into the complex world of college athletics. By using a broad range of literature and research, a series of hypothetical vignettes and careful analysis of the current situation of college athletics, the authors offer a panorama of the state of college athletics. The authors highlight the views of different stakeholders, such as university presidents, boards, faculty members and sports administrators, as they relate to the varied contexts and thereby underscore the problem of trying to make any quick decisions about college athletic reform.

The writers examine athletics from historical, legal and regulatory, social and cultural, and financial contexts. In each of these contexts, they argue that perception is reality. The authors are cautious about defining a specific way

to make decisions in this complex environment, but warn that the current decision-making process is not working well. They suggest that each stakeholder views the decision points from their own perspective and, often, the individual or group responsible for the decision relies on information from one or more of these groups or even delegates the decision-making authority to a local level. In using this silo method, the decision is made without the full benefit of a complete picture of the context. While this delegation of authority is often needed and applauded in other arenas, the college sports program answers to at least three different masters and decisions need to be made that reflect the regulations of the university, local and federal regulations and those of the governing bodies, such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

The authors place this complicated system into context by beginning with theories of organizational change. Higher education literature is full of theories of university adaptation including institutional isomorphism (Gumport and Sporn, 1985). Estler and Nelson look at sports management through the varying lenses of different types of adaptation and different drivers for adaptation to conclude that sports administrators, who are more tied to the management of sports through their membership in organizations such as the NCAA than they are to their local institutions, make decisions that directly affect the college or university without clearly understanding the institutional context. This specialization of college administrators in all realms of campus life can lead to decisions that are made

without complete understanding of the individual institution. NCAA regulations do not necessarily conform to the Federal Laws such as the Americans with Disability Act. The NCAA is not currently required to follow federal guidelines since it does not receive federal money. How a particular campus addresses the needs of student-athletes by juggling the statutes of the federal government and the NCAA can have lasting impact on university departments seemingly unconnected to the athletics department. The authors suggest that sports administrators be encouraged to examine more closely their local college environment and balance it more equitably with the cosmopolitan view of the national regulatory agencies. This parallels information from the college management literature on local versus cosmopolitan faculty (Birnbaum, 1988).

The major drawback of the manuscript is that it does not delve into any one topic deeply. The section reviewing the role of Title IX in the current state of athletics is the most in depth, but still leaves the reader wanting to know more. The authors offer this writing as a complement to the broad body of literature already in existence that discusses more deeply individual aspects of the topic. This is but a jumping off point to begin any study of college athletics reform, but more information is needed before any decisions can be made. While the authors grapple intelligently with the issue of who is calling the shots, they do not, nor cannot, unequivocally answer the question. Rather they fall to the old standby, that it is only by approaching the system from various angles that any real reform can be

made. "In other words, not one thing will significantly change this complex system" (Estler and Nelson, 2005, p. 93).

In the concluding chapter of the book, the writers offer to campus leaders several specific recommendations. These recommendations are helpful, but to bridge the gap between athletics and academics will take more than a few campus leaders following the advice of this book. "Successful reform requires multi-pronged strategies ideally based in coalitions to consolidate influence" (Estler and Nelson, 2005, p. 93).

The authors conclude that while there are many advantages to the current structure of college sports management, ultimately a system has been produced that is "a tiger whose tail is in the hands of campus leadership, offering support to an athletics juggernaut at the expense of academic programs" (Estler and Nelson, 2005, p. 105–06). The authors offer suggestions to the various stakeholders attempting to control this tiger, but in the end simply suggest that the beast is so far out of control

that it will take many years and many agents to rein it back in. In the meantime, this manuscript is a concise place for practitioners to begin to understand the game of college athletics. Further, by using college athletics as a case study, academic administrators can learn, hopefully before it is too late, some of the challenges that face postsecondary education in achieving financial independency as these institutions create alliances with external agencies.

References

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