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Reevaluating Prestige: The Influence of History on the Decision to Reclassify to Division I: A Case Study

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The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of an institution's past on the administrative decision to reclassify the institution's athletic department to NCAA Division I. The study focused on the environment that existed prior to the reclassification and the administrative rationale used to justify the move. Two universities, University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and Elon University, were chosen for case study analysis. Data were collected and analyzed using case study methodologies and an adapted model of Pettigrew's contextualist approach. Documents, archival records, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, physical artifacts, and direct observations from each institution were gathered. Three constructs from Pettigrew's model: context, process, and content served as the basis for data analysis. Content analysis of all documents and interview transcripts revealed several themes. Results indicated that although the context at each university was different, each university believed the reclassification would improve their institutional profile among competitive peer institutions. Findings aid in gaining a better appreciation of the historical context in which the organizational change of the upward reclassification to Division I occurred. This study serves as a first step to understanding administrators' rationale for moving an athletic program to Division I.

Schwarz (1998) defines reclassification as the process by which an institution of higher education makes a “formal request to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for a change in division membership” (p.3). The decision to reclassify from Division III or II to Division I will undoubtedly alter an institution’s support of their athletic programs (Cross, 1999; Schwarz, 1998; Tomasini, 2003, 2005). NCAA membership ascension to Division I, the highest level of competition, is a tedious, complex, and expensive process that can impact both internal and external constituencies of an institution. Typically, this organizational change can cause a wide range of reaction from the on-campus community debating the increased commitment to athletics from the university. For some, the overemphasis on athletics is seen as harmful to the academic mission of the institution, yet for others the belief is that a move to Division I will bring much needed public recognition to all facets of a university.

Until August 2007 when the NCAA implemented a four year Division I reclassification moratorium, universities were more aggressive in trying to achieve a high level of athletic success by reclassifying their intercollegiate athletics programs to the most demanding level of competition, NCAA Division I (NCAA, 2007). Even now, schools have still prepared for the possibility of entering Division I, when and if the reclassification suspension is lifted (Kramer, 2009; Powers 2007). Past research (Cross, 1999; Schwarz, 1998; Tomasini, 2005; Roy, Graeff & Harmon, 2008; and Weaver, 2007) has indicated that because of the enormous investment of ongoing resources, schools should not enter into the reclassification process without first understanding the impact such a move would have on the university constituency.

Although there are several factors that lead an institution to the decision to reclassify, one often overlooked yet very important factor is the historical context in which the decision was made. With the exception of Cross (1999), past research examining reclassification fails to carefully study the background and reputation of the institution, and the impact the institution’s historical profile has had on higher education administrators’ rationale for moving to Division I. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of an institution’s past on the administrative decision to move to Division I.

Literature Review

History has always played a major role in shaping college athletics. Intercollegiate athletic competition between colleges and universities first occurred over 150 years ago and current understanding of the athletic landscape is informed by its earliest developments (Mechikoff, 2000). Duderstadt (2000) writes that, “the history of college athletics can shed light on current challenges” (p.64). Research addressing the formation and early stages of intercollegiate athletics indicates that university administrators viewed athletics as a means to generate publicity and increase enrollment (Brooks & Althouse, 1993; Chu, Segrave, & Becker, 1985; Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986). Administrators, if not already aware of sports’ popularity, became very familiar with the power of intercollegiate athletics with the advent of television in the 1950’s (Hart-Nibbrig & Cottingham, 1986). As television coverage grew to enormous heights in the latter half of the 20th Century, higher education officials not only took notice of their own school’s place in intercollegiate athletics history, but also the history of their competitors.

Historical events that may impact a decision to reclassify can come in the form of a single athletic occurrence that has gained tremendous recognition for the institution, (Toma & Cross, 1998), a set of repetitive events that help build athletic traditions or college rivalries (Mechikoff,

2000), or the institution's history outside of intercollegiate athletics, which helped shape the current profile (Cross 1999). Chu (1989), Duderstadt (2000) and Sperber (1990) also suggest that it is not uncommon for higher education administrators to analyze the athletic history of competing institutions with a similar profile in order to determine a strategic course of action.

Using the past to make higher education decisions about the present is not limited to just intercollegiate athletics. In a qualitative study conducted by Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2002), the authors stated that "the conduct of higher education is influenced by long standing traditions and norms" (p. 23). Lawrence (2006) highlights one college president who discussed her decision making process and formulated her vision for the future of the institution, including the athletics department, by stating that

I like to be a student of the history of the institution...I had faculty, staff and students tell me how they were organized, why they were organized that way, what the current situation was and what they saw as key changes (p. 266)

This study, a component of a larger project, examined how history impacts higher education administrators' decision to reclassify an athletic department to Division I.

Methods

Site Selection

Two universities that reclassified to Division I, one large public, the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and one small private, Elon University, were chosen for case study analysis. UNCG reclassified from NCAA Division III to Division I in 1991 and Elon University reclassified from the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) to NCAA Division II to Division I in 1997. Site selection criteria included: 1) each university is located in the central North Carolina region, 2) many of the faculty, staff, and administrators at each institution are still involved at their respective institutions, (making it possible to locate and interview key informants), 3) each institution had been established as a Division I program for 5 or more years, and 4) between 10-20 years of historical data on reclassification was available on each school.

Study Design

Data were gathered using documents, archival records, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, physical artifacts, direct observations, and semi structured interviews.

Theoretical Framework

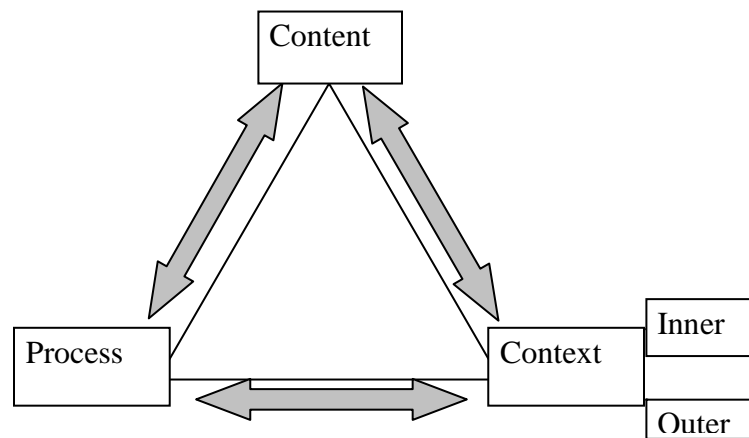
Because change in sport organizations is rapid and the definition and management of change is different from institution to institution, it is vital to allow the process of reclassification to be examined from a broad perspective. Pettigrew (1987) suggests that change is best studied through a "multilevel analysis of change over long periods of time" (p.51). Emanating from this concept is a perspective of organizational change called the contextualist approach.

Case study methodology and an adapted version of Pettigrew's contextualist model highlighting three dimensions related to change: process, content and context served as the basis

for this study (see Figure 1). Pettigrew (1987) depicts the interaction among the three elements by placing each at the corner of a triangle. Because the approach considers a wide range of dimensions that affect change, research that utilizes the contextualist approach tends to be exploratory in nature. The most significant aspect within this approach, as it relates to this study, is the recognition that an organization’s history could influence organizational change. To better utilize the contextualist model as the theoretical basis of this study, the adapted model (Figure 1) will be discussed using the same elements (process, content, context); however it includes arrows to highlight the interaction between the three elements.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR RECLASSIFICATION OF AN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETIC ORGANIZATION*

*Model Adapted from Pettigrew’s Contextualist Approach Model to Organizational Change



Process: actions, reactions, and interactions from the various interested parties. How do we change?

Content: aspects of the organization that are being changed. What could change?

Context: *Outer context* – historical, social, economic, political, and competitive environment in which the organization operates. Why did these environments influence the decision to reclassify? *Inner context* - organizational elements that influence the change process

Process

Pettigrew (1987) describes the term process as it “refers to the actions, reactions, and interactions from the varied interested parties as they seek to move the organization from its present to its future state” (pp.657-658). An analysis of the process, using the contextualist approach addresses the “how” of change. For the purpose of this study, focus on the process helped to better understand how the reclassification took place. In addition, this concept provides insight into subjects’ actions, reactions and interactions before, during and after the reclassification. Identifying relationships and analyzing how these relationships evolved or disintegrated throughout the process of reclassification was also important.

Content

An analysis of the content addresses the “*what*” of change and also requires a simultaneous examination of both process and context. The content examined as a part of this case study included the constituencies that were affected by the reclassification. Those people included, but were not limited to: faculty, students (including student-athletes), staff, administrators, alumni, and the greater community.

Context

Context is separated into two categories, inner context and outer context. Pettigrew (1987) described inner context as those organizational elements that influence the change process. The ideas of change will pass through the inner context. The outer context refers to the “social, economic, political, and competitive environment in which the organization operates” (Pettigrew, 1985, p. 657). Much of the “*why*” of change is derived from an analysis of context, particularly the inner context. Influence before, during, and after the reclassification of athletics may be due to the inner context, such as the institution’s management structure, on-campus traditions and cultures, the intercollegiate athletics history and culture, and political makeup of the university.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study evolved from the researcher’s experience in intercollegiate athletics and previous research on reclassification. A combination of qualitative techniques was used to gather data such as documents, archival records, interviews, participant and direct observations, and physical artifacts. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher employed three specific techniques: triangulation, member checking, and thick description (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2003).

First, a thorough examination was required of all available archival records and documentation relating to the history of the athletic programs and the transition of the athletic department. Archival records and data were collected from universities’ libraries, archives, athletic department records, and university websites. Once preliminary data were gathered about each institution (historical facts, institutional profile, dates of reclassification, initial reaction to the potential move, general athletic department press releases), data were re-examined to narrow down potential informants. Informal interviews and conversations were then conducted with constituents on each of the campuses to identify the gatekeepers or those individuals who played the most significant roles in the transition.

The next step of data collection included one-to-one, in person, semi-structured interviews with individuals (N=11 at Elon, N=11 at UNCG) representing the following groups: athletic department administration, senior level administrators, and top level administrators/faculty members outside the athletic department. Some participants represented one or more of the identified groups. At UNCG, subjects interviewed were three top-level administrators, five senior-level administrators, and three athletic administrators. At Elon University, subjects interviewed were six top-level administrators, three athletic administrators, and two senior level administrators.

A semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes was conducted with each subject. An interview protocol was established and maintained to ensure that all areas of interest were covered. Interview questions were developed in three distinct phases: questions that addressed before, during and after the reclassification process. For example, questions included, but were not limited to: What do you think motivated the change? What was the environment on campus prior to the move to Division I? Why did you think this was (or was not) the best strategy for your school at that time?

Each subject was given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for clarification purposes. In some specific cases, subjects were re-interviewed (N=2 at Elon, N=2 at UNCG). All interviews were audio recorded and tapes were transcribed verbatim and coded by the interviewer. For the purposes of this paper only data collected regarding events that occurred prior to the reclassification will be discussed. Informed consent was obtained through oral and written consent forms. All research protocols were approved by the UNCG and Elon University Institutional Review Boards. Interviewees have been identified with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the archival records and institutional documents, and each interview to identify prominent themes. To eliminate oversight, another content analysis was performed on each interview once all of the interviews were completed at each institution. Researchers who were familiar with the reclassification and intercollegiate athletics conducted a separate content analysis. Categorical indexing was used to classify common themes or central ideas that emerged from the interviews. Major themes were selected and agreed upon after further discussion among the research group. The themes from each interview were given back to the subject as a form of member check. Highlighted themes were based on the three constructs taken from Pettigrew's model: process, content, context (internal and external).

Results

Analyzing the history at UNCG and Elon revealed major themes that suggest administrators at each institution were unsatisfied with the current institutional profile and hoped the reclassification would change constituents' perceptions of the institution. The move to Division I was beyond athletic desires, but rather an effort to improve the overall institutional profile.

Document Analysis and Interviews

Data collection occurred between fall 2001 and fall 2008. Documents examined were university documentation, personal records, subjects' notes from meetings, numerous books and news articles. Interviewees (N=11 at UNCG; N=11 at Elon) representing athletic department administration, senior level administrators, and top level administrators/faculty members outside the athletic department were interviewed between 2002-2006.

A major theme that emerged from the detailed study of both institutions was *that the historical reputation of each institution and the need to be viewed as a more prestigious university, compared to peer institutions, influenced administrators' decision to reclassify to*

Division I. Although the major theme was similar, each institution's history tells a very different story about why the reputation was suffering. The following section examines each school and underlying themes that emerged while analyzing each school's history.

UNCG

Moving Beyond the Woman's College Reputation

For UNCG, it was perceived that the reclassification to Division I in 1991 would *help create a new identity*, different from its past profile as a woman's college. The environment at UNCG prior to the reclassification of the athletic program was one of change and confusion, mainly due to the transformation made after 1963 when the University moved from the Woman's College (WC) to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). Not only was this a name change but more importantly, a philosophical change (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1992; Trelease, 2004). Since the mid 1960's the University has tried to change from a small, single-sex college to a major research state university with "high research activity" (Nonte, 2006); however, the transformation was and still is very complicated.

Since becoming a part of a larger university system, UNCG struggled to develop an identity as a coeducational, research-focused, doctoral granting state university. Specifically, the University could not divorce itself of its past and therefore struggled to be seen as a major state university, capable of providing undergraduate and graduate degrees to men and women. The 2000-2003 UNCG Self Study Report stated that during the 1970's "its new role as a doctorate-granting university had not yet captured the public's attention" and through the 1980's, "tension [about UNCG's new identity as a research institution] still existed" (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2005, p.26). In an effort to bring attention to the new institutional profile and to create a student-friendly atmosphere similar to other higher profile state schools, the administration decided (among other major philosophical changes) to reclassify the intercollegiate athletics program to Division I, officially beginning the process with the Board of Trustees approval in February 1987 (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1992).

Subjects interviewed felt strongly that the identity created in the 1960's had essentially gone unnoticed: "We just weren't developing at all. We needed to do something. Division I athletics was part of that something" (Subject Albany).

Everyone continued to call us the "WC"...alumni, faculty, students, and the community. We were still the nice little campus that served the female population. I remember one influential person who had been on the Board of Governors, this was the board that oversaw the entire UNC system, would refer to us as "WC" and that was a decision that was made 15, 20, 25 years earlier. We could not break out of that! It was a struggle. (Subject Dunkirk)

The late 1970's and early 1980's continued to bring confusion to and a lack of identity at the University. Although much had been accomplished in the 1960's and 1970's, the institution lacked a direction, and the necessary funding to make any significant improvements (Trelease, 2004). Subjects felt that a main reason for external constituent's continued apathy was the on-campus resistance of those that did not want to embrace the change made in 1963. One subject

(Mount) candidly stated, “If we (alumni, faculty, staff, and administration of UNCG) were not going to welcome the idea of “UNCG” why would anyone else?”

Another administrator provided more detail on the alumni perspective, which he believed represented a general feeling from “more than just the WC alumni, but also their friends, neighbors, coworkers, family, really everyone within the state”:

Primary among them was the context which we found our self in, in North Carolina. There was always a struggle with that matter and there was always a pullback from the graduates of WC. And many of them were the spouses of the powerful men who were graduates of Chapel Hill, State, and Duke and wanted to keep it just as it always was. (Subject Dunkirk)

Conversations about how to address this identity problem quickly focused on the role of attracting and retaining the male student to campus, as well as remaining welcoming to the strong female student body. As one subject suggested, “we moved away from some things that quite honestly were just outdated, but it was not that we didn’t want to remain loyal to the women’s population” (Subject Albany). Specific academic programs, such as math and sciences, and extracurricular activities, namely a Division I intercollegiate athletics program, stood out as possible options to attract the male students and help eliminate the stigma that UNCG was mostly a women’s college (Trelease, 2004).

Increasing visibility: A comparison to other institutions

In addition to monitoring its own reputation, UNCG administrators were also evaluating and comparing their profile to other schools, specifically the other UNC system schools. The departure from the “WC” philosophy and the similarities that existed between many of the sixteen state institutions made the competition for in-state students and state funding very demanding (Trelease, 2004; University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2005). Subjects believed that the lack of aggressiveness to embrace the new mission of UNCG and the inability to create a unique option within the state system hurt the University in many ways. The most apparent was the way the outside community and the state legislature responded to UNCG’s new identity and thus ignored the institution’s financial needs:

What Greensboro did sheepishly and quietly in the 1960’s, almost embarrassingly, was to say we are no longer a woman’s college. And even though in the 70’s we still had that heritage, which was a tremendous heritage which should always be embraced, we did very little to promote ourselves to the politicians, to the state, to everyone for that matter. I think that hurt us. (Subject Dunkirk)

UNCG for years had believed that their institution had not received the appropriate funding to fulfill the mission of a doctoral granting university bestowed on them in 1963. Despite the doctoral mission and large graduate enrollment (second only to Chapel Hill in 1977-78), UNCG ranked “fourteenth of fifteen in per-pupil funding (in 1990 they were eleventh)” (Trelease, 2004, p.416). Not only was the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (UNC) and North Carolina State University (NCSU) receiving more financial assistance, so were new

universities in the state system, UNC Charlotte (UNCC) and UNC Wilmington (UNCW), among others.

Kenneth Sanford (1996), an administrator at UNC Charlotte, writes about the North Carolina State Educational System as one in which educational allocations historically depend more on regional politics and personal agendas rather than on institutional needs and accomplishments. Similar feelings about state funding had been part of UNCG's administration thinking as well. Overall, the belief was that UNCG and the city of Greensboro was and would continue to be a tier below UNC, NCSU, and UNCC, and their home cities of Chapel Hill, Raleigh and Charlotte.

Also, demographic trends indicated that the pool of high school applicants was predicted to drop through the 1980's and 90's, making competition for the smaller pool even more aggressive (Trelease, 2004). Administrators felt that Division I athletics would create a better perception of both the Board of Governors and the potential future students of UNCG, particularly the male population. The reality was that a continued financial shortfall from the state legislature and a decreasing student body would be unacceptable, considering the funds had not been sufficient to meet the needs of the current administrators, faculty and students at UNCG. Administrators spoke specifically about the lack of support that UNCG was receiving from the legislature:

I was a complete supporter [of the move to Division I] and of course I understood the context we were in and knew that our resources from the State, our resources for faculty salaries and resources for other things were always at risk unless we were seen as a much more serious player (Subject Dunkirk)

Some administrators believed that this lack of athletic recognition in the state not only impacted high school students' choice of college, but also impacted state funding.

At the same time other schools were emerging in North Carolina through the 60's and 70's including schools like Charlotte and East Carolina and then Wilmington, and also the historically black schools who were obviously also part of the one umbrella, the 16 campuses that the Board of Governors was overseeing. In that context there was a struggle for resources and there was a desire for everyone to have as much as they could. We had to create an identity. (Subject Albany)

The state perception was and still is important to UNCG because a positive opinion from the state constituency influences the UNC Board of Governors, the governing body which determines the amount of state support given to each institution. UNCG administrative thinking was that the better the state perception, the more funding. The rippling effect of continuous insufficient state appropriations was vast. Without support, UNCG would have to exist with an inability to properly support the academic programs and thus, would be unable to attract strong faculty. In addition, capital improvements, which were dreadfully needed on campus, would go unattended. Potential applicants would see a university with an insecure future based on a "dilapidated academic program with an infrastructure poorly financed" (Subject Albany) and a campus that did not compare to the modern, aesthetically pleasing grounds at other state institutions. Since a large majority of the college applicants were (and are) from North Carolina,

it was (and is) essential to remain a viable or “first-choice” candidate for North Carolina students to attend UNCG.

It is pretty simple - without students, we don't have jobs, no campus...we don't have anything. But we have to give them a reason to be here. We must not forget that. What are some of the reasons? Good academics, good campus life, nice place to live, eat, you know. The state needed to support what we were trying to do, at the level we were trying to do it at. Otherwise, we should have never changed our institution. Let's go back to doing what we used to do. (Subject Albany)

In the early to mid 1980's when the discussion was initiated about reclassifying to Division I, administrators believed that such a move would help with increased recognition from the state's two most powerful financial resources – the UNC Board of Governors and the students. .

UNCG Administrators also believed that they needed to stay on the minds of potential North Carolina students, particularly males, if they wanted to avoid mediocrity and admit second rate students, a problem that had plagued them in the past. One athletic administrator spoke of underlying administrative motivations for the reclassification:

That's where people with the power decided we need to move it forward. Now the rationale that I was led to believe was that it was not an “athletic rationale”. The Chancellor wished to have the institution that he was president at be one of the most visible – visible and popular institution – so he could in fact perpetuate his graduate school...His undergraduate program was nothing to necessarily write home about. So he wished to equate Division I so his undergraduate program and so that his graduate program would be perceived as top shelf. (Subject Hartwick)

One administrator/faculty member felt that the reason to reclassify was not about the future of the athletics department or the University, but specifically shedding the images of the past:

There was a mindset in the University leadership that they wanted to once and for all shed the image of this being a girl's school. It is not about sports, a lot of this got shrouded in sports, kinda got shrouded in math and science as well. (Subject Whitehall)

The impact of the reclassification was felt wider than just the athletics department personnel (administrators, coaches, student-athletes). Because the reclassification was not just about enhancing the athletic department, but rather a much larger institutional change, the impact was intended to affect the University community, with a major focus on the modification to the student population:

The move to Division I was part of a master plan to increase its size and enhance student life. It is visibility, recognition...especially to the male students. The purpose was in fact, to bring more and more gifted people into this program. (Subject Altamont)

Another subject who was both an administrator and faculty member suggested that the impact on students may have been felt before they even took a class at UNCG:

I see students, good students choosing this University as their first choice, rather than a back-up. I think athletics used to be a disability, the look of the campus used to be a disability in so many different ways. I would guess athletics has contributed to that, but to what extent, I have no idea. I think that students identify it as more a legitimate state university campus. As an academic it pains me to say that – even though I was a former coach, student-athlete, athletic administrator. I have always loved and supported intercollegiate athletics. But as an academic, I hate to think it plays such an important role in the image of an institution. But I think in the long run it has helped UNCG. (Subject Syracuse)

A former administrator, now coach agreed:

For the University to be attractive to students, in that part of time in the early 80's, we felt that we were losing students to Appalachian, to Wilmington, to ECU. We weren't attracting the quality students. (Subject Altamont)

Leaders at UNCG were also aware of the major differences in athletic teams at other state schools. The city leaders were optimistic that UNCG could follow the similar success of UNC Charlotte's basketball team, which helped represent a flourishing city, in particular the struggling downtown area (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1992; Schlosser, 2006). Perhaps the biggest external influence on the decision to reclassify was the public perception that UNCC had developed an athletic reputation as a winner. UNCG administrators and Greensboro civic leaders believed that a successful Division I athletic program, particularly men's basketball, would improve the University's and the city's image; similar to what happened to Charlotte and UNCC. One administrator stated:

What I kept hearing about was UNC-Charlotte. They had gotten to the Final Four in the late 70's in men's basketball. And there was still this rivalry between Charlotte and Greensboro. Obviously, [the city of] Charlotte was the one that was going to make a big go of it. Charlotte was going to be the one that was going to grow. But athletics was a part of that thing. I think that was what was motivating some of our business leaders in the earlier 70's to see us go to Division I. They did it in Charlotte, we can do it. Look what they got. Look at all of the visibility the city and the University received. This move was driven by envy (Subject Syracuse)

Summary

Since UNCG became part of the University system in 1963, it has struggled to develop an identity as a co-educational, research focused, state university. In an effort to bring attention to UNCG's new institutional profile and to create an atmosphere similar to other North Carolina state schools, the administration decided to move the intercollegiate athletics program from Division III to Division I.

In the fall of 1986, UNCG's athletic programs began the five year plan to move to Division I. The controversial move to Division I was completed in 1991 and more than 18 years later still remains a debatable decision. However, the rationale for that decision was based

heavily on administrators' beliefs that the reclassification would benefit the overall profile of UNCG.

Elon

The following section on the history of Elon University provides detailed information about the change in context prompted by the transformation of Elon from a college described as a "small, unattractive, parochial bottom feeder" (Keller, 2004, p. 4) to a nationally recognized, medium sized university (U.S. News & World Report, 2006).

Improving Status

The repositioning of Elon College was based on the fact that Elon's personal attention to its students and an attractive campus in a warm weather climate had created an environment that students enjoyed. The administration was aware that Elon was positioned in a growing state located in the middle of the East Coast. The campus was also a short distance away from two growing North Carolina regions, the Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill) and the Piedmont Triad (Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem). The mid 1980's brought about a major decision from the administration and the trustees to, "create a different kind of college for a different kind of student" (Keller, 2004, p.12).

The philosophy of the new Elon College was to move away from the local and regional admissions strategy that had been used in previous administrations to one that marketed and heavily recruited students nationally and eventually internationally. Elon would also raise tuition and become a medium-cost college, rather than a low-cost college and recruit students from middle-class to wealthy families that could afford to pay full tuition, a must due to Elon's small endowment at the time (Keller, 2004).

To match the philosophy, Elon spent a great deal of money recruiting specific students, added faculty that were strong teachers willing to work closely with students, borrowed a tremendous amount of money, increased alumni giving, created new academic programs, and perhaps most importantly designed a first-class campus that would attract potential students and their families (Keller, 2004).

By the end of 1980's, students from different states were attending Elon. Faculty members rose from 74 in 1980 to 125 by the end of 1989, alumni giving grew from under \$1 million dollars in 1980 to \$2.8 million by 1989. The campus was rapidly improved with new buildings and facility improvements (Elon University, 2006).

Overall, the administration and trustees were pleased with the initial stage of the transformed Elon College. However, the 1990's brought additional changes (Keller, 2004). The administration developed the "Plan for the 90's" which focused on the continued development of the academic and co-curricular programs, additional facilities and improved campus landscaping, and increased academic quality. These improvements were necessary in order to build on the success of the 1980's, however Elon lacked the funds to put the plans into motion. Based on the need for additional funds, the Board of Trustees voted to begin an \$18 million campaign to finance the goal of becoming "one of the best institutions of its kind on the Eastern seaboard" (Keller, 2004, p.16).

At the same time, Elon's intercollegiate athletics program was also moving from NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) to the NCAA Division II membership. A

move that was necessary once the membership of the South Atlantic Conference felt that the NCAA was a better long-term fit for their members. More importantly, the move to the NCAA fit perfectly into Elon's new institutional strategy (South Atlantic Conference, 2006; Keller, 2004). As Elon moved into the 1990's, a theme of distinction and uniqueness became fundamental to virtually every decision made. In looking back, administrators suggested that this was the first step in the process that would separate themselves, both athletically and academically, from area schools still laboring in NAIA, which was a fading association in college athletics and no longer compatible to Elon's desired profile (Lederman, 1990; Monaghan, 1995).

A common theme in all the outcomes in the NewCentury @ Elon plan has been based on strategic decisions that place Elon in categories similar to, or perhaps higher than, institutions that Elon hoped to emulate. In union with the strategy of the NewCentury @ Elon plan, improvement in status was also being made in the athletics department, first transitioning into the NCAA Division I-AA level, then gaining conference affiliation into the Big South Conference, and finally moving conferences to the more prestigious Southern Conference. As one subject stated:

Expectations were, that as all of these other changes were taking place, that it would also eventually cover athletics, athletics was not going to be left back. As we make academic strides, and student life strides, and we incorporate our emphasis on engaged learning and international travel and SAT scores go up, then you know our athletic expectations also rise – and quite frankly, I think athletics was ready for greater expectations. (Subject Lewis)

Examining memberships, accreditations, and associations outside of athletics, it becomes apparent that the administration was very concerned about establishing relationships with high level institutions. Along with athletic reclassification, Elon moved from a college to a university in 2001, has also become a member of prestigious associations such as the Associated New American Colleges (ANAC) in 2000 and most recently Phi Beta Kappa (2009) (Associated New American Colleges, 2006; Belanger, 2003; Corby, 2009). In addition to university associations, individual schools worked very hard to be accredited by prominent organizations such as Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (Love School of Business), National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (School of Education), Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (School of Communications) (Elon University, 2004; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2006; Elon University Schools of Communications, 2006).

At Elon, the decision to move to Division I was greatly impacted by the need for the university to *improve its university reputation* by being accepted into memberships and associations that are selective; one of those memberships was Division I athletics. Subjects continuously stated that the move from NAIA to NCAA Division I was part of a larger, more comprehensive strategic change that began in the mid 1980's and is still ongoing at Elon University. Administrators repeatedly stated the process of moving the athletic program was based on the philosophy "that people judge you based on the company you keep" (Subjects Frank, Water, Woods, Jones, Yetto). Similar to accreditation boards establishing high standards in academics, so too is Division I membership in athletics; thus, becoming a member of the more prestigious Division I level and more specifically, the Southern Conference was thought to be a great benefit to the University.

A lot of times people will associate your institution with the schools you play. Now at the time we were members of the South Atlantic Conference, Division II, good institutions, but Elon was progressing, academically, to a higher level. (Subject Hall)

As long as we are playing against [schools in the South Atlantic Conference] that's where we are going to be pegged, because so much of your publicity is athletics. You do not get academics publicity. So you are sort of pegged there when in an academic way we are really leading that pack. (Subject Price)

When the Southern Conference voted us in – you know this is one of the finest academic endorsements this institution has received – when Furman and Davidson are giving you a vote of approval. That was an academic thing...it was an institutional validation. (Subject Yetto)

Peer institutions success

Other private schools at the Division I level have experienced national recognition from their athletic achievements. As television exposure in the 1980's and 90's increased, in particular for men's basketball programs, small private schools without Division I-A football programs were major beneficiaries. Because Northeast schools such as St. John's University, Georgetown University, Providence College, and Villanova University as well as Southern schools such as Richmond University and Davidson College, all experienced national attention by the 1980's, it seemed reasonable that other private institutions believed that this type of recognition was possible. As the coverage continued nationally, West Coast schools such as Loyola Marymount University, Pepperdine University, and Gonzaga University all experienced national media exposure in the 1990's. This national recognition did not go unnoticed by the administration at Elon.

The study at Elon revealed that administrators believed that the exposure received from athletics would bring positive recognition to campus. Administrators at Elon felt that a good Division I program could bring attention to the other organizational changes, similar to the national exposure provided to other private schools. It also became clear that administrators thought that it was possible for Elon to be successful at Division I, like other private schools, and get the same national exposure.

The real school I was looking at was Furman, who is in the Southern Conference, and then Richmond, and Wake Forest, who obviously are not. I think of them academically and I think of them athletically. But you know the perfect image of a private school that I think about is Gonzaga. Anybody that knows Gonzaga, why do they know Gonzaga? Do they know that they have a good history program? If I tell you that they have a great history program you will believe it because their basketball team is good - it is just perceptions. It is just a perception; they are a winning team that is what attracts students. (Subject Frank)

I would rather have been, from the get go, affiliated with Davidson, Furman, Wofford, and UNCG, which are all schools that have Phi Beta Kappa chapters. Not to be

disrespectful to other schools, but it is a matter of one set of schools, the Southern Conference, is our peer group when it comes to undergraduate admissions. This was about institutional position as much as it was about athletics, in other words Elon was aspiring to be a Division I school athletically and also academically. (Subject Lewis)

Summary

In the late 1970's and 1980's, the institution began a marketing plan to change the tiny school's position and status in the academic community. As the results of the plan began to happen in the early 1990's, the school's reputation began to change from an ordinary school to one of the "best private schools along the Eastern seaboard" (Keller, 2004, p.2). To improve its status as an institution that competed on the highest levels, Elon moved to the NCAA and in 1997 began the move to Division I-AA. Similar to other institutional decisions, administrators believed that the transition to Division I was a move to improve their association with peer institutions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of an institution's past on the administrative decision to move to Division I. Each school studied had a similar dissatisfaction with their historical profile and wanted to reclassify to Division I in order to improve their status. A case study approach was utilized with two institutions having already transitioned to Division I, the University of North Carolina Greensboro and Elon University. Qualitative research, more specifically a case study approach, was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to best answer the central question of "what happened" and the subsequent research question examining how history affected the decision to reclassify (Creswell, 1998; 2002; Yin, 2003).

The conceptual framework chosen as the basis for this study was very important to the identification of expected and unexpected themes throughout each case study. Examining the reclassification to Division I at UNCG and Elon through context, content, and process allowed the data to be categorized and discussed as independent data, yet it became clear that each area noticeably related to the other. Although Pettigrew's contextualist approach has been used to study organizational change in business organizations, it appears as though it is a useful tool in analyzing reclassification and higher education organizational change. Because the approach considers a wide range of dimensions and applies a broad perspective, research questions were exploratory in nature. By using the contextualist approach, questions were asked that addressed not only the process of reclassification, the people impacted by the reclassification, but for the scope of this paper allowed data to be collected related to the historical context of the university. Questions addressing the environment of the institution before, during and after the reclassification to Division I allowed subjects to reflect on how historical factors could have impacted administrators' decisions to reclassify. These factors may not have been considered had the interview format not followed the contextualist approach.

The trend for athletic programs to reclassify suggests that schools are becoming more similar in their vision to be the best, as each school aspires to athletic success at Division I, and each school hopes that Division I athletic success translates into other institutional measures of success, mostly through an improved athletic and academic reputation. However, this type of

logic can be costly. Tomasini's (2005) found that schools that reclassified to Division I-AA from a lower level between 1993-1999 did not result in a significant positive difference in incoming freshman applications, undergraduate enrollment, donations to the university general fund, attendance at home football games and corporate sponsorship revenue in the first three years following reclassification.

Perhaps more disturbing to the study is the overall logic that moving to Division I will help improve an institution's profile. Brewer, Gates, and Goldman (2002) state that gaining prestige or improving a school's reputation through athletics comes at a very high risk because everyone cannot be at the top or in the case of athletics, cannot win all the time. Gaining prestige, through any ranking system, including athletics, is a zero sum calculation. As your institution moves up in the rankings due to winning you are replacing another school that is not as successful. Therefore, schools have to invest in the cost of escalating to the top, as well as the continued expense of staying at the top. Although not the main focus of this particular article, yet addressed in a larger study (Weaver, 2007), financing the move to Division I and improving institutional profile was a major concern to administrators at each institution.

The need to place schools in athletic classification categories (Division I-A, I-AA, I-AA, II, III), indicating that one is better or more prestigious than the other, is similar to classification categories long used in other aspects of higher education, such as research classifications (Carnegie Classification System) and accreditations. This belief that reclassifying to the highest level, Division I, would help legitimize the institution is similar to the Upward Drift phenomenon discussed in higher education literature. The Upward Drift phenomenon, used by Clark Kerr (1991) to describe institutions' never ending quest to improve their ranking in research, created an environment in which "all 2,400 non-specialized institutions of higher learning in the United States aspire to higher things" (p 8). Although Kerr used the description to identify a trend with institutions improving their research, the description could also apply to the reclassification trend in college athletics.

The improvement administrators were seeking is very similar to the underlying philosophy of Kerr's "Upward Drift" mentality, used to describe schools that want to achieve a higher status. Data in this study suggest that Upward Drift has moved far beyond Kerr's assessments of only impacting research universities trying to gain a higher status through a heavy graduate school or research agenda. It appears based on the rationale given by the two institutions, Upward Drift, specifically through reclassification of the athletic program, extends to schools with varied profiles outside of heavy research agendas or major Division I programs.

Results from the case studies suggest that schools, and more specifically athletic departments, are changing to look like other successful Division I institutions. UNCG and Elon administrators both used examples of other schools that each would like to imitate – (North Carolina state schools, and Davidson, Wofford, Furman, and Richmond, respectively). Thus, success would be measured by completion of the Division I reclassification process and developing an image similar to these other schools. UNCG and Elon administrators felt that if their athletic department could be like other "legitimate" schools, then a stronger sense of belonging would occur. The study suggests that reclassification, similar to the other classification processes, results in an isomorphic behavior that is causing an upward trend to Division I.

The result of isomorphism has been found in many other studies in higher education (Meyer & Scott, 1991; Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Rusch & Wilber, 2007; and intercollegiate athletics (Cunningham and Ashley, 2001; Danylchuk and Chelladurai, 1999). In addition, the research suggests that schools are becoming more similar because of the classification systems

(Aldersley, 1995) used in higher education to suggest one school is better than another. Rusch and Wilbur (2007) contend that achieving accreditation for schools is another isomorphic behavior that defines an institution's prestige. A lesser recognized classification system in higher education circles appears to be Division I athletics.

This study adds to the limited literature on the reclassification of athletic departments in that it supports previous research (Cross, 1999; Schwarz, 1998; Tomasini, 2003) in the field of Division I reclassification that suggests it is not uncommon to upgrade the athletics program to Division I in order to generate publicity and create awareness. Most relevant is the case study analysis performed by Cross (1999), in which three public universities stated that the rationale for moving to Division I was, in part, to address the lack of awareness by each institutions' external constituencies. More specifically, Cross cited "competitiveness, improved image and enhanced exposure" as rationale for some universities to transition to Division I (p. 196). Additionally, the case study supports Schwarz's (1998) study that found schools that have reclassified from Division III or II to I did so because of philosophical factors, such as the institutional philosophy toward intercollegiate athletics, and behavioral factors such as the support of the president and athletic director toward the reclassification.

Results did indicate that an institution's history plays an important role in the decision to reclassify. For example, historical events (big wins, athletic pageantry, championship seasons, and star athlete receiving national recognition) that have improved another school's image are often cited as reasons for becoming a "big-time" athletic department (Chu, 1989, Davies, 1994, Mechikoff, 2000). Similar to Cross (1999), administrators measured the perceived impact of intercollegiate athletic events and traditions by analyzing the enhanced notoriety, increases in donations, and an improved undergraduate admissions pool at institutions that operated at Division I.

Study findings should be interpreted with caution as there are identified limitations. The subjects interviewed throughout the study may not be individuals who were directly involved during the *entire* reclassification process; individuals have come and gone at different points during the reclassification and therefore could affect the accuracy of the data. Every attempt was made to identify and interview those subjects having the most familiarity with this particular organizational change. The researcher brings over 10 years experience in intercollegiate athletics to the study, including employment in the athletic department for almost three years at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The researcher was also an adjunct instructor at Elon University during the data collection phase, and has since become a fulltime faculty member. Therefore, eliminating affiliations, preconceived biases, and expectations of success are difficult. Regarding the scope of the study, the number of institutions that were studied (N=2) was small. The schools also came from the same geographical location. However, they were chosen to help best represent those schools that have reclassified. The research is also heavily influenced by one type of constituent, administrators. While it may be important to interview students, alumni, faculty, coaches, and community constituents this study focused solely on the administration's point of view. Although not included in this paper, administrators comments took into account both directly and indirectly these other constituents.

Implications

From a practitioner's point of view, higher education administrators can benefit from this research, particularly schools that are considering a reclassification similar to the two institutions

in this study. The research was specifically designed to study one public (UNCG) and one private (Elon) institution; one school with (Elon) and without (UNCG) football, large (UNCG) and small (Elon); one with a strong emphasis on research (UNCG), the other with an emphasis on teaching (Elon); with the idea that other schools from different categories are able to find some similarities, particularly as it relates to the role of an institution's historical profile on reclassification. This study assessed the historical factors associated with the reclassification process so that other schools that have an interest in improving institutional profile are able to take advantage of similar opportunities and avoid potential mistakes.

Administrators considering a move to Division I can learn valuable lessons regarding the historical impact of reclassification. First, similar to other studies, this study indicated that administrators expressing interest in reclassification consistently point to improved prestige and/or reputation as a rationale for the move to Division I. However, administrators need to be aware that improving the institution's historical profile is still dependent on the ultimate athletic justification – consistent winning in their most visible sports, which can be very difficult to achieve. Therefore, administrators should examine closely these non athletic justifications because athletic justifications solely do not seem to provide a strong enough rationale.

Next, using reclassification of the athletics program to Division I in order to improve the institutional profile should be one decision among many decisions outlined in a strategic plan that promotes diverse development, not just athletics. Administrators at the two schools studied used athletics as a vehicle for highlighting other aspects of an improving institution.

Third, athletic administrators should pay close attention to the magnitude and effect of such a large organizational change as reclassifying the athletic department to Division I, and thus should not try to implement such a decision quickly and hastily. When moving to Division I and thus changing the profile of an institution, many constituents will be affected, including but not limited to alumni, current students, the local community, the athletic department staff, and institutional faculty and staff. Therefore, administrators that wish to use reclassification as an opportunity to change the institutional profile should not make this decision without careful consideration for the institution.

Due to the current moratorium, and because of the rigorous five year process, the NCAA policies appear to be sufficient for schools to properly analyze their capabilities to operate as a Division I institution; however this study indicates that the decision to move to Division I is much more complex and time consuming when administrators consider the impact of the move on the institution's past and the institution's need to establish policies about the future of intercollegiate athletics at the particular institution. Administrators need to pay close attention to the purpose of intercollegiate athletics within the mission of the institution. In both cases, each institution was moving away from an historical profile that was not in line with future goals. Included in institutional policies must be a clear plan, before an institution reclassifies, on how much support will be provided to establish and more importantly maintain a Division I athletic program. Administrators must understand that improving prestige is not a limited time solution. Gaining prestige and improving reputation does not necessarily come when a school moves to Division I, but rather becomes an established program and is competitive at Division I. Therefore, the most important policies need to address the long-term financial burden assumed by the institution, the students, and the donors, because it appears a consistent problem in reclassification is the underestimation of the resources needed to *maintain* a Division I program.

Recommendations for Future Research

Qualitative literature on the reclassification to Division I is very limited and needs further exploration. The foundation for further exploration has been laid by using Pettigrew's conceptual framework and the two case studies; continued research on each institution is necessary for truly understanding organizational change at each institution. For a deeper perspective research should focus more closely on one of the themes identified within one of the three elements of Pettigrew's Contextualist model – context, process, and content. Studies examining the influence of reclassification to Division I on their student's decision for schools, or alumni and fans increasing their support, administrative and faculty on employment are needed.

This study took a very unique approach by examining a private institution. Because information is typically easier to obtain from public institutions, there appears to be a tendency to study public schools. Additionally, in the study of intercollegiate athletic studies, there has been a strong propensity to study Division I-A public institutions, or what Sperber (2000) calls the "beer and circus schools". However, there is a trend developing in private institutions that are similar to their "beer and circus" counterparts. Future studies should continue to examine the Upward Drift at private institutions and examine the role intercollegiate athletics plays in that phenomenon. Research also needs to be conducted on the impact of intercollegiate athletics, when athletic success is non-existent or limited. If administrators continue to provide non-athletic rationale as the rationale for improving intercollegiate athletic programs, yet winning is the measure of success, then what goals are achieved when schools do not win? Additional research also needs to be conducted from the schools that have moved to Division I and decided that the organizational change did not work (specific examples include: Northern Illinois University, Birmingham Southern University, and Morris Brown College).

Prior to the NCAA moratorium, schools reclassified to Division I at a rapid rate. Research should examine this group longitudinally to gain a perspective on overall organizational change and subsequent success or failure. In depth qualitative studies need to be continued, as well as adding quantitative research beyond financial data.

Finally, the study raises an interesting concern about the Division I athletics status. UNCG and Elon both expressed the desire to improve their institutional status by moving to the highest level – Division I. However, if schools from Division II, III and NAIA continue to reclassify to Division I, one could question the future impact of the Division I brand.

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