



College Sports and Institutional Values in Competition: Leadership Challenges

By Jennifer Lee Hoffman.
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Jennifer Hoffman, an associate professor at the University of Washington, offers a new departure point to explore the intergenerational struggles between higher education and their sports programs. Rather than ground her inquiry in the perennial issue of what, if any, purpose elite athletics have in US universities, Hoffman accepts college sports as a given. Instead, she asks what college sports teach us about their institutional hosts. This re-framing pushes readers to consider what sports can reveal about the mission, purpose, and objectives of their respective institution. In doing so, she offers significant contributions to the studies of higher education, sport, and organizational leadership. Her book provides conceptual and practical insights into the organizational and leadership strategies necessary to ensure colleges and their athletic programs flourish.

Drawing upon a vast array of higher education administration and leadership literatures, she discusses the organizational and institutional complexity of universities. Each chapter opens with a vignette, illustrating a discursive organizational theme to be explored in the forthcoming sections. She then introduces the readers to relevant theories of higher education to investigate the relationship between institutional contexts and athletic governance. Her evidence arises from robust and diverse studies traversing the terrains of moral foundations of education, organizational leadership, administration and decision-making, neoliberalism, gender equity, and student affairs. Throughout, Hoffman offers exercises and scenarios to investigate the themes. These practicums could be used in the workplace for professional development such as within NCAA compliance offices or student affairs units. The content is also relevant for a range of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, and sports management as well as specific subject-areas such as Title IX, the history of college sports, organizational administration and leadership, and ethical decision-making. Combining theory with practicums makes her book easy to follow for a range of audiences.

In Chapter 1, Hoffman introduces her governing framework, discourse critique, to explore the relationship between sports and higher education. Bass et al. (2015) famously

positioned intercollegiate athletics as a “visible ‘front porch’ for the university” that welcomes the public into academia (p.1). Hoffman employs discursive critique to challenge this metaphor. When university leaders call athletics their “front porch,” sports become external to their organization. Ascribing athletics outside the university, Hoffman argues, permits leaders to shift blame for some of the greatest crises of our time: (a) racially exploitative labor systems; (b) gender inequity; and (c) declining democratic participation.

Hoffman engages poststructuralist traditions to remind readers why metaphors, like the front porch, extend beyond the symbolic realm and enact real-world effects like shaping the unequal distribution of capital. She illustrates how the discourses deployed about and within colleges, universities, and sports, shape the realities and outcomes of the organization. Amateurism, for instance, is a discursive cultural ideal that has tangible effects. The values within amateurism produce rules, organizations, and hierarchies all of which comprise collegiate sport. By tracing the discourses surrounding the institution, we can view the true values and purposes of higher education.

Hoffman begins applying her discursive framework in Chapter 2. She opens by scrutinizing the “Division I (DI) school” discourse, the most elite grouping of institutions within the NCAA. This discourse reflects how athletic conference membership has become a key marker for describing a university. Such discursive practices convey that athletics drive conference membership and in turn university status. In reality, universities choose which athletic conferences to join, and university administrators often lead these organizations. DI discourse permits presidents to avoid culpability for the out-of-control spending and scandals often associated with the DI conference.

Chapter 3 opens with the dilemma of cutting college sports. Hoffman situates this organizational decision in the history of town-gown tensions between universities and local communities. She examines how sports and universities expanded through commercialized spectator events—an expansion only possible through local communities’ emotional and economic investments in intercollegiate athletics. Whether and how universities should participate in commercialized sports remain an unresolved question she takes up in Chapter 4. Too often, higher education institutions blame athletic departments for cultivating consumer markets around men’s football and basketball, thereby disguising the active role university leaders played in the process. Hoffman notes entrepreneurialism originated and expanded at higher rates in academic enterprises such as creating markets to compete for students, faculty, and research funding. Thus, academic units engage in the same tenets of capitalism they harangue athletics for such as competition, exploitation, and collusion.

Chapter 5 explores the subsidies undergirding sports by universities, students, communities, and public tax dollars. She studies the discourse of “going to college” as institutionalizing a collegiate ideal grounded in space, place, and human connection. Universities rely on recreational and varsity sports to deliver these idealized student experiences. Chapter 6 examines the discourses embedded in the collegiate ideal that substantiate amateurism: (a) “getting a full ride,” (b) “lifelong passion,” and (c) “going pro.” Hoffman delineates the gendered, classed, and racialized meanings within each discourse that translate into different college-going experiences.

Hoffman’s analysis of amateurism establishes the core question of Chapter 7: *Is separate still equal?* Here, she scrutinizes the “separate but equal” discourse Title IX enshrined into organizational practices. This discourse permits gender to “hid[e] in plain sight” as women are constructed as inherently inferior to men and in need of separate teams (p. 110). Organizing

sports this way normalizes an oppositional and binary gender order leading to the widespread subordination of women, trans*, and non-binary people across all of sports. Separate but equal also positions men's sports as an athletic "baseline" permitting men to retain control of all athletics (p.122). To illustrate this point, Hoffman turns to leadership roles noting how men coach most women's teams, a standard that is commonplace and but unevenly reciprocated. Such a practice means men have less competition in hiring as they can coach any team (men's or women's) whereas women coach mostly women teams. Hoffman also discusses how Title IX harms trans* and non-binary athletes as these athletes have limited access to and protection within gender-segregated sports. She concludes the chapter by discussing the implications of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation on men and women athletes alike.

At each turn in the book, Hoffman reminds readers how organizational decisions impact students. For instance, in Chapter 8, she explores the discourse of activism. Universities have narrowed the definition of activism, focusing on voter participation and community service as the acceptable form of student engagement. Dissent and political mobilization for social change are often discouraged. Universities go even further to curb athletes' activism by threatening loss of playing time or scholarship monies if caught participating. Disrupting activism, Hoffman warns, undermines opportunities to develop future leaders and increases public distrust for higher education.

Chapter 9 showcases Hoffman's expertise on organizational decision making. While the public and researchers alike focus on large leadership decisions, such as whether to cut a program, the biggest changes in universities and sports arise through small, incremental actions. This framing leads to her conclusion Chapter, "Change is Already Here," in which Hoffman argues the transformations university and sport leaders fear are already upon institutions: (a) amateurism reform; (b) increasing diversity; and (c) technology and eSports. Hoffman's entire book, but particularly this final chapter, offers the context needed to digest the impacts of recent actions like the Supreme Court ruling *NCAA v. Alston* and the NCAA deciding to eliminate their NIL restrictions.

If we still imagine the university as a house, then Hoffman considers athletics to be windows. Athletics are not only embedded in but portals to view the mission, purpose, values of higher education, and whether or how these institutions live up to their mandates. If we do not recognize athletics as such then "students and their families" will continue to suffer "because of the systemic and individual leadership failures of faculty, administrators, and coaches who at best are unaware or at worst, deliberately act out of their own or the institution's interests" (Hoffman, 2020, p. 90).

References

- Bass, J. R., Schaeperkoetter, C. C., & Bunds, K. S. (Eds). (2015). *The "front porch": Examining the increasing interconnection of university and athletic department funding: AEHE, 41(5)*, San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.