



We need more 'intentionality' to increase diversity in FBS leadership

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Representative bureaucracy is a theory suggesting that entities generally perform better when leaders and decision-makers reflect the characteristics of their constituencies. In NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision college sports, there is a significant disparity between white male leadership and their constituents, the generally diverse student-athlete population. In 2019, 83% of FBS presidents and chancellors were white males; 79% of FBS athletic directors were white males; and 85% of FBS head coaches were white males. In stark contrast, 65% of FBS football student athletes were people of color.

That reality, coupled with the racial equity movement sparked by the killing of George Floyd and other African Americans, led my boss, Tom McMillen, a former congressman and current president and CEO of LEAD1 Association, which represents the 130 athletic directors within the FBS, to assign me to staff one of the most important projects on which we had ever embarked as an association.

In late August 2020, LEAD1 created a working group, co-chaired by Sean Frazier, associate vice president and athletic director at Northern Illinois University; and China Jude, senior associate athletic director for administration and senior woman administrator at the University of Wyoming; and comprising our athletic directors, athletic administrators as well as other practitioners, to examine issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in college sports.

The leadership of McMillen, Frazier and Jude, and the dedication of our approximately 30 working group members, led to our recently released white paper, which outlines 10 actionable recommendations that FBS college sports can take to create more senior diverse leadership within the enterprise. In addition to representative bureaucracy, the paper offers several key themes that can help FBS college sports rectify some of its long-standing racial inequities.

In 2003, the NFL adopted the “Rooney Rule,” a policy that mandates that every NFL team interview at least one diverse candidate, or else be subject to a monetary fine. Even with the Rooney Rule, the reality is that there are only three African American head coaches in the NFL. But at the NCAA level, there are legal hurdles that would likely preclude the NCAA from mandating such a rule. NCAA members, for example, are subject to differing state laws, and it is also more likely that any policy akin to the Rooney Rule would have to come from a conference, which would require buy-in from a significant number of the conference members, or directly via state legislation. Because of these jurisdictional, enforcement and practical issues, our working group concluded that it is incumbent upon the FBS enterprise itself, especially those with large resources and platforms, to drive the necessary reforms. That is where the need for more “intentionality” comes into play, and can be created in several different ways.

First, given that power is often consolidated in the hands of a small number of people in FBS college sports, the vast majority of these individuals being white men, people of color must understand who the key leaders are and build relationships with them. Many entry-level and mid-level administrators, however, generally lack the network and mentors needed to help them advance in the industry, and the current practice of “speed dating,” where candidates are introduced to key leaders in a short period of time, has not led to sufficient change. FBS college sports, therefore, can take actionable steps through more programming aimed at creating networking and mentorship opportunities. Helping to “sponsor” more

people of color at all levels in their career will help grow the pipeline of qualified diverse candidates for senior leadership positions.

Second, without the requisite “sponsorship” from leaders, people of color often get pigeonholed into more limited areas within an athletic administration, making it more difficult to develop sought-after skills in areas such as fundraising and football administration. For instance, in 2019, among finance and fundraising types of positions, only 20% were people of color within the entire FBS. Search firms, in particular, can help create more intentionality for people of color by better communicating the expectations of search committees, helping search committees evaluate job applications from diverse candidates, and taking more responsibility in coaching the people of color who they place into candidate pools for consideration.

Third, in recent years across the FBS, there have been several notable examples of demands from student athletes regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion issues that have led to significant outcomes, such as administrators stepping down and changes to NCAA and state policies. The Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee, typically within FBS athletic departments, should, therefore, be given the power, in collaboration with their administrations, to influence and shape athletic department and campus policies and respond to student-athlete demands.

For FBS college sports, implementing these types of actions, as well as others, can significantly increase the number of qualified diverse candidates and help more people of color develop the skills needed to advance. To do nothing would amount to a failure to acknowledge the problems that brought us here and will only result in exacerbating current institutional inequities.

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