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Kelly P. Elliott

Coastal Carolina University, kelliott@coastal.edu

Beth Johansen

Coastal Carolina University, ejohansen@coastal.edu

Amanda M. Siegrist

Coastal Carolina University, asiegrist@coastal.edu

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An Analysis of Perceptions of the Relationship Between the Athletic Director and Athletics' Direct Reports in NCAA Division II

Kelly P. Elliott

Beth Johansen

Amanda M. Siegrist

Coastal Carolina University

Abstract

The campus administrator to whom the athletic director (AD) reports directly is known as the athletics' director report (ADR), the roles and responsibilities of which are not clearly defined for NCAA Division II campuses. The absence of clear guidelines creates the opportunity for differences in the relationships between the athletic director and the designated ADR between peer institutions. This pilot study explores current relationship between ADs and ADRs while providing current and suggested practices. ADs and ADRs responded to surveys regarding perceptions of the AD and ADR relationship in addition to offering recommendations to improve the relationship. Researchers identified common themes reported by participants regarding the relationship. Results indicated positive relations between ADs and ADRs on campus and that communication is key to a successful relationship. Recommendations for practitioners include working with NCAA representatives to clearly define and establish ADR guidelines and to create division-wide ADR training opportunities.

Keywords: *athletic directors' report, collegiate athletics, administration, NCAA*

Please send correspondence to: Kelly Elliott, kelliott@coastal.edu

Throughout the past decade, there have been many noted changes to NCAA legislation amongst all three NCAA divisions. Although the majority of media coverage has highlighted the deregulation of NCAA legislation at the Division I level, there have been significant changes occurring at the smaller Division II level as well. For example, Division II has relaxed financial aid restrictions and transfer regulations for student-athletes. Given these changes will continue to occur, attention should be paid to the work done on the individual member institution campuses as these changes are discussed and implemented. There has been little scholarship on the working relationship between the athletic director (AD) and the athletics' direct report (ADR) when changes are necessary or new legislation impacts current practices (e.g., approving recruiting budget increases from the AD). For the purposes of this research, the AD is defined as “the person who oversees all sports functions within the individual institution’s athletic department” (Wilson et al, 2009). ADs also have oversight of facilities, events, finances and logistics of the athletic department (Wright et al., 2011). The ADR is defined as the senior administrator at a college or university to whom the AD reports directly (Green, 2020).

In the past, ADs have indicated they were happy with their current reporting structure (Sanders, 2004). Unfortunately, much of this research is decades old. Further, researchers have yet to explore the perception of the ADR in their relationship with the AD. Previous research provides insight into the relationship between Division I ADs and presidents from the perspective of the AD (LeCrom & Pratt, 2016). However, the relationship may differ for those competing at the NCAA Division II level because of the limited revenue and media exposure generated by the athletic department programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain a holistic picture of the relationship between ADs and ADR working in the Division II landscape. In this exploratory, pilot study, ADRs and ADs provided their perspective of the relationship and provided suggestions for future communication and governance in the relationship.

Review of Literature

Athletic Department Governance

Early research indicated managers preferred clear lines of communication, clear specifications of authority and responsibility, and clear knowledge of to whom they were responsible (Perrow, 1973). More recently, LeCrom and Pratt (2016) indicated trust and communication, alignment, respect for expertise, and formal and informal relationships could be the foundation to the relationship between the AD and institution presidents in the Division I space. Clear guidance for the day-to-day decision-making authority of the AD could help establish a better working relationship. For example, LeCrom and Pratt (2016) noted that ADs suggest presidents should avoid “micromanaging.”

Micromanagement has been defined in the literature as, “control of an enterprise in every particular and to the smallest detail, with the effect of obstructing progress and neglecting broader, higher-level policy issues” (White, 2010, p. 71). Research indicates micromanagement can lead to turnover in an organization (White, 2010). Although limited micromanaging was suggested from the perspective of ADs in previous research, it may be beneficial to take a more holistic approach. To do this, it is important to include recommendations from the ADR to further the investigation into the current working relationship between ADs and ADRs to identify best practices. Micromanaging can be perceived as a negative, con-

trolling behavior (Chambers, 2004). Interestingly, researchers have also pointed out practical situations when micromanagement can be effective if the practice is communicated to employees (Delgado et al., 2015).

Practitioners have cautioned that if managers are micromanaging, employees may become frustrated or stop taking initiative (Yost, 2013). From an employee perspective, employees who have trust in their supervisor's competence were less likely to perceive themselves as being micromanaged (Irani-Williams, 2021). Employees also report a negative perspective of their manager's power and leadership strength when participating in micromanaging behaviors (Raveendhran & Wakslak, 2014). Twist (2007) suggested managers can develop leaders by giving employees autonomy and not micromanaging. For managers with a tendency to micromanage it is suggested they confront their micromanagement behavior and must be willing to change the behavior (Chambers, 2004).

On the opposite spectrum of micromanagement is the process of rubber-stamping. "Rubber-stamping" can be defined as "approve, endorse, or dispose of as a matter of routine or at the command of another" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). "Rubber-stamping" boards made up of friends and colleagues could cause concerns for an organization as the individuals may feel a sense of loyalty to the CEO and avoid thoroughly analyzing information or bringing up information that may conflict with the CEO, leading to a board that will endorse and sign documents without even reading them (Fink, 2006). Oliver (2000) suggested there is no perfect spot on the continuum when it comes to the involvement of the board, but organizations should adopt a strategy in the middle of the extremes of rubber-stamping and being in the weeds with management. A culture of an ADR rubber-stamping all requests from the AD could cause issues for the university, especially related to the various stakeholder groups the AD and the ADR must address.

As ADs and the ADR form their relationship and establish guidelines, stakeholders can hinder the relationship. Stakeholders are individuals or groups of individuals who have a stake in the organization (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015). When stakeholders are being addressed, their needs are evaluated by the urgency, power, and legitimacy of the given stakeholder (Chelladurai, 2014). When analyzing stakeholder needs, it is likely the AD may place the needs of certain stakeholder groups above others whom their direct reports deem a priority. One of the key functions of management is to establish objectives (Chelladurai, 2014; Sawyer et al., 2008). Considering the variety of stakeholders with whom the AD and his or her ADR work, it is possible that the objectives of the two parties could differ. For example, the ADR might prioritize initiatives from major university partners whereas the AD might prioritize the needs of coaches or student-athletes. The conflicting stakeholder needs could influence objectives set for the athletic department, especially objectives that may require additional funding.

Institutional Isomorphism

Institutional isomorphism occurs as institutions adopt practices that may mimic other institutions in their environment (Dacin, 1997; Deephouse, 1996; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). In the review of research related to athletic department policies, institutional isomorphism has been applied to the study of mission statements (Ward, 2015), tiered giving structures (Lipsey et al., 2021), and athletic department personnel decisions (Elliott et al., 2022). Similar policies at multiple institutions could indicate ADRs are rubber-stamping suggestions, decisions, and actions from ADs prior to having a fruitful discussion on the

implications of decisions and actions to the university. Although adopting similar policies as their peers could lead to an institution being seen as legitimate in the environment, it could risk the inclusion of information that speaks to the uniqueness of the specific institution (Ward, 2015). The presence of institutional isomorphism in athletic department policies and procedures could indicate limited involvement and communication between ADs and ADRs.

Method

To begin exploring the perceptions of the current relationships between ADs and ADRs, survey links were sent to all Division II ADs and ADRs working at NCAA Division II institutions ($N = 313$). To help ensure as many perspectives as possible in this pilot study, ADs and ADRs were contacted separately. The researchers obtained the names of each institution's designated AD and ADRs on the NCAA Directory. The researchers then found email addresses for each employee on their institution's website. Participants were emailed an invitation to participate in the survey. The surveys contained 13 open- and closed-ended items related to the working relationship between the AD and ADR. The survey items are listed in Appendices A and B. With the exploratory nature of this research, content analysis was used to identify common themes reported by participants.

Triangulation was used in this study as it is a common qualitative research method when needing to evaluate information from a variety of sources for consistency (Mertins, 2020). Information was sought from multiple sources (ADs and ADRs) using the same method (a qualitative survey instrument; Mertens, 2020). During content analysis, the researchers used a data-driven coding process to ensure predetermined themes did not create bias (Brinkmann, 2013). The data-driven coding process allowed researchers to expand their knowledge and find nuances in the data provided by participants. Two researchers coded the data provided by participants separately and collaborated when assigning themes to support reliability during the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). After the first researcher coded the data, the second researcher coded the data independently to audit the process. After each researcher coded the data, the researchers discussed their findings. To support interpretive validity, empirical material from the responses provided by participants is reported entirely in the form of verbatims (Johnson & Christensen, 2016).

Results

A total of 22 ADRs and 13 ADs responded to the survey. ADRs included in this study reported a of 7.1 ($SD = 5.6$) years of experience in the role, and ADs included in this study reported a similar average of 7.4 ($SD = 6.4$) years of experience in the role.

Overwhelmingly, the data reported by the participants indicated a positive working relationship between ADs and the ADRs. In response to why participants believed they had a positive relationship, both ADs and ADRs indicated the relationship included shared values ($n = 10$), mutual respect ($n = 8$), constant communication ($n = 8$), and having an open relationship ($n = 7$). ADR participant 12 stated, "My relationship with the AD is very good."

We have a mutual respect of what each one of us has responsibility for. I support him in any way possible for the betterment of our student athletes.”

In the discussion of how ADs and ADRs actively interact, all participants ($n = 35$) indicated frequent communication. Seven participants reported weekly meetings, six participants reported monthly meetings, and three participants noted there was a meeting between the AD and ADR twice per week. The theme of regular communication between ADs and the ADR emerged in the data. ADR participant 22 noted:

We have open communications and talk many times a week. We formally meet every other week, but I have much more regular interaction with him in addition to that. We both frame the agenda and identify topics for discussion. Our interaction has been especially important as he learns his role and the broader university.

In addition to the data reported on formal meetings between AD and the ADRs, data also suggested many informal meetings as well between the positions. Seven ADRs indicated they routinely attend athletic events to show support for the AD and athletic programs.

The survey asked participants what stakeholder groups the participants interacted with in their role. The purpose of this question was to gauge the priorities of individuals when making a decision. Both groups of participants indicated alumni as a stakeholder group they work with in their role. Boosters, faculty, and community leaders were also commonly mentioned stakeholders. Although there were similar stakeholders listed by each group of participants, the ADRs reported interacting with more external stakeholder groups compared to the ADs. In the discussion of interacting with stakeholders, AD participant 35 indicated:

The AD often interacts with as many stakeholders as the President’s Office but has a fraction of the resources to handle that properly. Ensuring the AD has access to other campus leadership is critical to unleashing the positive benefits of an intercollegiate athletics’ program.

The data provided by participants indicate a multitude of stakeholders should be considered when making a decision and resources may impact the ability of the AD to interact with the stakeholder. The next section of the results focuses on the decision-making process and interaction between ADs and the ADRs.

When asked about the types of decisions that should involve a discussion between the AD and the ADR, decisions involving personnel were reported the most by both ADs and ADRs. Additionally, both groups of participants reported budget decisions also required discussion between ADs and ADRs. Student-athlete wellbeing and strategic planning were also mentioned frequently by the participants. For example, with regard to strategic planning, AD participant 25 stated:

I recognize the time challenges upon the president, so I am very careful how I use his time for athletics’ purpose, and I rarely “go to that well.” However, on issues that require significant financial outlay, I seek him out.

Although many similarities emerged from the responses provided about the types of decisions that warrant a discussion, the idea of rubber-stamping decisions received mixed reviews from participants. All ADs indicated that there were times where rubber-stamping a decision would be acceptable as opposed to only seven ADRs who indicated the practice would be acceptable. Among the participants that indicated there were times rubber-stamping may be appropriate, routing purchase requests and travel requests were frequently mentioned. Overall, the data provided by participants indicated the financial impact of the decision and the overall impact of the decision should be evaluated when considering the practice of rubber-stamping.

In the discussion of recommendations for the relationship between the AD and the ADR, regular and open communication was a theme that emerged from the data. Three ADR participants indicated the necessity for the employee designated as the ADR to have the time to supervise athletics. AD participant 30 indicated, “As an AD, you should be able to make the decisions you need and not need constant approval and oversight.” The theme of allowing the AD to make decisions without the ADR micromanaging developed throughout both AD and ADR responses.

Overall, the results provided by the participants revealed there is a common positive relationship between ADRs and ADs. The data reported by participants also indicated mixed perceptions of the idea of rubber-stamping decisions.

Discussion

The relationship between Division II ADRs and ADs was mostly strong, though there was a difference of approval between both groups of participants when it came to rubber-stamping decisions. The findings from this study closely relate to previous research into the relationship between Division I ADRs and ADs finding communication should be the foundation of the relationship (LeCrom & Pratt, 2016). The Division II Model Athletic Department document indicates the AD in best practice should, “report directly to the CEO (or have access to the CEO if reporting directly to a vice-president)” (Athletics Directors Association, n.d., p. 5). Although the best practice document gives clear direction for the report, there is little guidance on the dynamic of the relationship or best practices for regular meetings or decisions that should have input from the ADR. Results of this study do not support institution isomorphism in the practices established by ADR. Peer institutions were not mentioned in the data, and the respondents did not appear to be seeking to legitimize or normalize practices in an external network. Although this finding may provide an indication of employees establishing procedure unique to the needs of their institution, it may indicate a lack of research into the implementation of other successful procedures at other institutions operating in the same NCAA network.

One solution for Division II could be to adopt a similar model to the Division III structure of the NCAA membership (Division III Athletics Direct Report Institute, 2022). The Division III structure offers a Division III Athletics Direct Report Institute yearly for ADRs to attend. Currently, Division III is the only division to offer structured programming to ADRs. Relationship dynamics and best practices could be discussed at these meetings. Additionally, the meetings could serve as an opportunity for the ADR to network and share resources with one another when determining a policy for campus. It is curious that

the yearly institute is a suggested best practice at the Division III level, yet not explicitly stated as a best practice at the Division II level.

Providing employees serving in the ADR role an opportunity to network and discuss policies and procedures could help the working relationship between ADs and the ADRs. ADs typically have monthly conference meetings, which provide an opportunity for ADs to discuss the relationship with peers. Giving the ADRs the same opportunities could help provide new perspectives in addition to viewpoints of those that deal with stakeholders at the vice president or president level.

In the Division III structure, the ADR should report directly to the president, have ongoing communication with the AD and president, engage with athletics by attending athletics meetings and events, be engaged at the conference and national level, and network. Having a meeting between ADRs could create depth and true meaning for the position, beyond a designation that has different practices across institutions in the same division. Having an opportunity for ADRs to learn the practices of peer institutions could positively impact the relationship and provide better services to stakeholders.

This pilot study identified many stakeholder groups that both ADRs and ADs interact with in their role; however, the power, legitimacy, and urgency of each of these stakeholder groups were not discussed. Having a better understanding about how the various internal and external stakeholder groups influence the decision-making process for ADRs and ADs can provide insight into possible conflict in the relationship as they work together.

Practical Implications

Regardless of adopting a model closer to the Division III structure regarding ADRs, there are important Division II aspects that exist, nonetheless. In the earlier discussion of micromanagement, it largely is viewed as a negative while acknowledging at times it may be necessary and effective. Times it may be necessary are when there is potential liability attached to the decision or decision-making or when the ADR's opinion determines which stakeholders should be prioritized in each situation. Well-written policy and procedure can provide oversight from the ADR on paper to, in effect, provide the chance for rubber-stamping, but with prior "approval and review" via the created form. That said, forms should be reviewed and revised regularly, and the advice of the athletics staff should be sought in the process because administrative assistants and other relevant staff may have a better working knowledge of the recurring issues than higher level staff within athletics or a university. Additionally, increased transparency about stakeholders across campus could not only improve decision-making and produce more optimal outcomes, but it should also build an atmosphere of trust amongst high-level administration across university offices.

Sharing information can prove to be a challenge, particularly as offices get busy with their own responsibilities. Even so, regularly scheduled meetings both internally among ADRs and ADs, and externally with ADs and university presidents, should still take place. There is seldom a viable substitute for in-person discussion and updates, particularly when so much of the decision-making requires an analysis of situations on a case-by-case basis.

In sum, athletic departments should work with NCAA representatives to clearly define and establish ADR guidelines as well as create division-wide training opportunities for ADRs. Open communica-

tion between ADs and ADRs needs to exist. There also should be a schedule of regular meetings between ADs and ADRs. Lastly, an athletic department culture should be created that facilitates the acceptance of the ADR by the athletic staff and student-athletes.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study offers a good starting point for examining the relationship between ADs and ADRs that could be strengthened in future studies by using closed-ended questions. For example, researchers could offer participants a list of stakeholders and ask them to rank the importance of the stakeholder in their decision-making process. This study also had a small sample size that was restricted to Division II. Future studies should include the perspectives of ADs and ADRs in Division I and Division III to gain a more holistic picture of the relationship. Participants in this study also reported a positive relationship with the AD or ADR respectively. Individuals who were not as involved in athletics or who did not place a high value on the focal relationship may not have been interested in taking the survey.

In closing, the relationship between the AD and ADR could impact athletic programming, in turn influencing student-athlete opportunities and wellbeing. Therefore, continued research into the reporting structure of the AD has the potential to benefit many stakeholders, most important of which are student-athletes. Future research in this paradigm should seek to provide clarity on best practices in the relationship between ADs and the ADRs.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument – Athletic Direct Report (ADR)

1. What is your current title at your institution?
2. How many years have you worked in your role as athletic director direct report?
3. List all functions you serve at your institution in addition to serving as the athletic director direct report.
4. What stakeholder groups on and off-campus do you work with in your role?
5. How do you characterize your relationship dynamic with the athletic director as the athletic director direct report?
6. How do you actively interact with athletic director to accomplish work processes?
7. Do you believe you have a positive relationship dynamic with your athletic director? If yes, please explain below how you maintain the positive relationship. If no, please explain why you believe you do not have a positive relationship with your athletic director.
8. What stakeholder groups are a priority to you when making decisions?
9. What type of decisions do you believe you should involve a discussion between the athletic director and direct report?
10. Are there times where a direct report will “rubber stamp” decisions made by the athletic director?
11. Could “rubber stamping” by direct reports be an effective part of an athletic department’s best practices (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command...)?
12. What current policy do you have (if any) for any interactions between athletic directors and the athletic director direct report?
13. What recommendations would you have for a policy regarding communication between athletic directors and director reports?

14. Please list any additional information you would like the researchers to know about the relationship and communication between athletic directors and the athletic director direct report.

Appendix B

Survey Instrument – Athletic Director (AD)

1. What is your current title at your institution?
2. How many years have you worked in your role as athletic director?
3. List all functions you serve at your institution in addition to serving as the athletic director.
4. What stakeholder groups on and off-campus do you work with in your role?
5. How do you characterize your relationship dynamic with the athletic director direct report as the athletic director?
6. How do you actively interact with the athletic director direct report to accomplish work processes?
7. Do you believe you have a positive relationship dynamic with your athletic director direct report? If yes, please explain below how you maintain the positive relationship. If no, please explain why you believe you do not have a positive relationship with your athletic director direct report?
8. What stakeholder groups are a priority to you when making decisions?
9. What type of decisions do you believe you should involve a discussion between the athletic director and direct report?
10. Are there times where a direct report will “rubber stamp” decisions made by the athletic director?
11. Could “rubber stamping” by direct reports be an effective part of an athletic department’s best practices (automatic approval or authorization without going up the full chain of command...)?
12. What current policy do you have (if any) for any interactions between athletic directors and the athletic director direct report?
13. What recommendations would you have for a policy regarding communication between athletic directors and director reports?
14. Please list any additional information you would like the researchers to know about the relationship and communication between athletic directors and the athletic director direct report.