

The management consequences of decentralization and specialization within sub-NCAA Division I athletic department structures



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Abstract

As college athletics in the United States transitions toward a highly professionalized "pro-llegiate" model, athletic departments face increasing managerial complexity. While NCAA Division I programs often utilize decentralized "enabling" structures to manage this complexity, institutions at the Division II and III levels have historically relied on "simple" structures characterized by centralized authority and generalist roles. There remains a dearth of empirical research regarding the consequences of structural transitions at the sub-Division I level. The purpose of this study was to examine the managerial implications of transitioning from a simple organizational structure to an enabling structure within a college athletic department. Using a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, this single case study analyzed a university athletic department transitioning from NCAA Division III to Division II. The quantitative phase utilized positional organizational network analysis (ONA) to compare reporting lines and structural metrics (centralization, distance, and compactness) pre- and post-reclassification. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews (n=10) with senior athletic personnel to explain the consequences of these structural shifts. ONA results indicated that the Division III "simple" structure functioned as a centralized hub-and-spoke model. The transition to Division II created a more decentralized "enabling" structure with significantly lower degree centralization and increased specialization. While the Athletic Director remained the most central actor, the introduction of mid-level managers (associate/assistant ADs) increased the geodesic distance between the leadership and staff, creating more intermediaries and specialized reporting paths. The findings suggest that transitioning to an enabling structure – or a hybrid organizational form – at the sub-Division I level effectively distributes administrative load but introduces coordination challenges by increasing the distance between staff and executive leadership. This study extends organizational design frameworks beyond Division I, highlighting how specialized roles and decentralized authority fundamentally reshape communication and influence within smaller athletic departments.

Keywords: *College Athletics, Organizational Structure, Organizational Network Analysis, Specialization, Decentralization*

1. Introduction

Upon arriving at UCLA to begin his legendary men's basketball coaching tenure, John Wooden learned that he was not directly working for the university administration, but rather for the associated students. The president of the student body was, in effect, his "boss." Early forms of intercollegiate athletics were loosely organized and often controlled by students themselves; however, increasing commercialization, competitiveness, and governance concerns gradually shifted authority toward faculty and institutional oversight (Smith, 1987, 1991). Over the past century, college sport in the United States has evolved from a largely student-governed activity into a highly professionalized sport governance model some scholars have deemed "pro-llegiate" sport (Southall et al., 2015). Today, college sport operates at a scale that closely resembles professional sport systems. In 2022 alone, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and its member institutions generated approximately \$13.6 billion in revenue, a figure that rivals or exceeds several major professional sport leagues (Morones & Heidt, 2023). Recent developments, including the introduction of name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities and emerging revenue-sharing arrangements with athletes following the House settlement, have further accelerated the complexity of the college sport landscape and intensified the managerial demands placed on athletic departments.

Operating within this environment may require a highly sophisticated organizational structure capable of coordinating human, financial, and operational resources. To this end, the size of the college sport workforce is significant. In fact, among

NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) member institutions, the highest level of intercollegiate athletics, coach and administrator salaries and benefits comprise roughly 36% of athletics department expenditure where total annual operating budgets average over \$100 million (NCAA, 2025a). As one institutional example, Michigan State University has approximately 300 full-time employees managing athletic activities across 20 subdivisions (The GIST, 2023). But perhaps a better indication (than workforce size) of the need for sophisticated organizational structures in college sport is how athletic departments have experienced exponential growth over the last decade among mid-level managers with more than 1,000 new assistant and associate AD positions introduced across FBS athletic departments (Hancock et al., 2024). From an organizational theory perspective, mid-level managers function as integrative mechanisms that connect strategic leadership with operational units. This layered coordination is a key feature of structural sophistication, because it moves the organization beyond simple hierarchy into a system of distributed but aligned decision-making (Mintzberg, 1979; Daft, 2016).

Management scholars commonly describe organizational structure through the dimensions of centralization, specialization, and formalization, which together shape how authority is distributed, how work is divided, and how responsibilities are coordinated within organizations (Mintzberg, 1979; Hall, 1999). Prior research has suggested that college athletic departments typically adopt one of two structural arrangements: a simple structure, characterized by centralized authority and

generalist roles, or an enabling structure, characterized by decentralized decision-making and greater specialization of duties (Cunningham & Rivera, 2001). While enabling structures are common among Division I athletic departments due to the scale and complexity of their operations, institutions competing at the Division II and Division III levels frequently rely on simpler organizational arrangements because of limited resources and smaller administrative staffs. However, at the NCAA Division II and III levels, implementation of the enabling structure is arguably more a deliberate decision of college athletic administrators given how fewer resources generally accompany the lower levels of college sport in the United States. In addition, there is a comparative dearth of research investigating the implications of organizational design at the Division II and III levels, which presents an opportunity to better understand how organizational structure impacts the management of athletic programs at the sub-Division I level and explore the advantages and disadvantages therein.

The purpose of this study is to examine the managerial implications at the sub-Division I level of transitioning from a highly centralized organizational structure with job roles characterized as generalists to a more decentralized structure including specialist roles. Using a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design within a single case study of a university transitioning from Division III to Division II, this research compares organizational networks and employee experiences before and after those structural changes. By integrating organizational network analysis with qualitative insights from athletic department personnel, this

study offers a perspective on organizational design in college athletics beyond Division I that was guided by the following research question:

RQ: What are the management consequences of increased decentralization and specialization within athletic department structures at the sub-NCAA Division I level?

2. Literature Review

Organizational structure is defined as “the reporting relationships that specify how the work is divided, coordinated, and controlled within an organization” (Clawson & Pitts, 2008, p. 90). Across industries and fields, work is organized and managed differently based on organizational size, strategy, culture, and other operating conditions (Mintzberg, 1979). Given how most organizations share a core purpose: achieving organizational effectiveness, which is the degree to which an organization realizes its goals (Daft, 2016), the tendency is to assume that organizational structures are efficiency driven. Yet, organizations often adopt structurally similar forms to maintain legitimacy within their institutional fields, even when efficiency trade-offs exist (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Davis 2015).

This is particularly evident in intercollegiate athletics where athletic departments conform to NCAA governance expectations and broader higher education norms, resulting in isomorphic structural features across institutions (Washington & Patterson, 2011; Slack & Parent, 2006). More specifically, constraints from environmental context (i.e., NCAA regulations), legalities (i.e., compliance), and revenue generation—especially in

Division I—will affect structure to some degree (Staurowsky, 2016). External stakeholders such as the federal government may also create constraints for how colleges and universities can operate and limit design alternatives (Cunningham & Rivera, 2001).

On the other hand, structure is not always a product of environmental pressures. The scope of coach and administrator salaries in Division I has already been established. Yet, in Division II, the schools with the highest athletic department expenses are spending in the region of \$30 million annually (NCAA, 2025b). Then, at the Division III level, athletic department expenses reach a maximum of around \$19 million (NCAA, 2021b). This data supports how Division II and III programs commit much less resources to athletics than their Division I counterparts, which equates to fewer employees and much smaller organizational structures. Similarly, organizational leaders also make choices that affect structural outcomes of departments and teams (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001). Again, structure can be both a product of the environment and managerial choice.

Irrespective of structural determinants, college athletic departments are frequently organized with a distinct hierarchical framework. At the top of this structure is the Athletic Director (AD), who holds overall authority and reports to senior university leadership (Masteralexis et al., 2012). Due to the complexity of college athletics, the AD who performs all administrative and managerial duties has long been a thing of the past (Jensen, 1988). Therefore, below the AD are associate and assistant ADs who, through delegated responsibility and authority, oversee major functional areas such

as compliance, finance, facilities, external relations, and student-athlete services, as well as day-to-day administrative responsibilities for individual sports teams (Cheatham, 1992; Masteralexis et al., 2012; Ott & Beaumont, 2020). Coaches, then, generally operate within sport-specific units embedded in this broader administrative hierarchy, reporting through sport supervisors or administrators (i.e., assistant and associate ADs) rather than directly to the AD (Green & Hancock, 2023).

This hierarchical layering reflects increasing vertical differentiation, a core feature of bureaucratic expansion in complex organizations. As organizations grow, additional managerial tiers are introduced to manage span of control, reduce coordination costs, and improve oversight of specialized functions (Mintzberg, 1979; Pugh & Hickson, 1976). In athletic departments, this has resulted in expanded mid-level management structures that function as coordination hubs between strategic leadership and operational sport units.

A formal organizational structure can typically be described using three interrelated dimensions: centralization, specialization, and formalization. Each dimension represents the degree to which authority, tasks, and behavior are concentrated or distributed among individuals and units within organizations (Hall, 1999; Mintzberg, 1979). Centralization represents the extent to which authority is concentrated at higher levels in an organization, allowing for greater control at those levels (Hall, 1999). Decentralization, on the other hand, “refers to the delegation of responsibility for service delivery and operational decisions to middle and lower level managers” (Devas, 1997). Specialization represents the degree to which work is divided

among individuals and organizational units. While specialization can increase efficiency within an organization, it can also create challenges when trying to coordinate tasks (Mintzberg, 1979). Furthermore, specialization implies that people will complete work that is relatively narrow in scope (Chelladurai, 2017). Formalization refers to the degree to which rules, procedures, and job descriptions are written and enforced within an organization (Pugh et al., 1968). Formalization decreases ambiguity within an organization but can limit individual flexibility and creativity. As Fidler (1997) suggests that for an organization to function properly, members of the organization must know what they should be doing and how their job relates to others in the organization.

Cunningham and Rivera (2001) established how specialization, centralization, and formalization were conceptually distinct and useful for identifying structural arrangements within Division I athletic departments. The simple structure has personnel occupying roles of a generalist where people wear several hats and where choices are made is undertaken in a more centralized manner, whereas the enabling structure involves decentralized decision authority frameworks and athletic personnel performing more specific duties (Cunningham & Rivera, 2001). Unsurprisingly, Cunningham and Rivera (2001) found the enabling structure to be the predominant design across Division I. Alternatively, the simple structure is more common across Division II and, especially, Division III. For example, because Division III programs operate with smaller budgets and fewer administrative staff, decision-making authority is often concentrated in the athletic director

and a small group of senior administrators, with fewer layers of sport-specific oversight or specialized units (Chelladurai, 2017). Given how athletic departments, despite great resource disparities, serve the needs of a similar number of college athletes, more employment positions at Division II and III include generalized duties and responsibilities. As one example, at Division III programs it is sometimes the coaching staff providing academic counseling support for their athletes, rather than a specialized academic advisor (Li et al., 2017).

This pattern is consistent with research on organizational hybridity in sport, which highlights that athletic departments often blend bureaucratic, professional, and institutional logics within a single structure (Greenwood et al., 2011; Slack & Parent, 2006). As a result, structural arrangements are not purely efficiency-driven but represent negotiated compromises between competing demands for legitimacy, performance, and resource acquisition (Washington & Patterson, 2011).

Of the three core dimensions of organizational structure, the principle of (de)centralization is particularly relevant in college sport for mid-level managers (i.e., those occupying hierarchical positions as key organizational connectors between the AD at the top and the coaches and support staff at the lower levels). The role of these mid-level manager sport supervisors within this sport oversight model is complex, and a lack of clarity exists on their role and expectations (Green & Hancock, 2023). Yet, in the context of Division I athletics, the sport supervisor's role is broadly understood to partner with head coaches to provide support,

advocacy, and oversight and evaluation of the programs they supervise (Green & Hancock, 2023). Ultimately, supervisors loosely control the job of coaches because this strategy permits the organization to achieve some goals that would not be achieved if they closely inspected and enforced total rule compliance (Rocha & Chelladurai, 2013).

Specialization also exists among the various functional areas that comprise an athletic department as associate and assistant ADs often oversee major functional areas within college athletic department structures. As such, college athletic departments divide work across areas such as coaching, compliance, academic support, athletic training, strength and conditioning, marketing, development, and facilities management that require specific expertise and professional training (Masterelexis et al., 2012). While NCAA bylaws do fall short of requiring athletic departments to create specific job titles, they do require that certain functions and responsibilities are carried out. Such requirements demonstrate how another core dimension of organizational structure—specialization—is evident within college athletic department structures. This pseudo-enforced specialization often is expressed through the hiring of dedicated compliance officers, eligibility specialists, and risk management personnel to monitor adherence to NCAA rules and protect institutional interests (Staurowsky, 2016). As a result, employees typically perform narrowly defined roles with clearly delineated responsibilities (Chelladurai, 2017).

Over time, this specialization has also contributed to the development of distinct professional subcultures within athletic departments, such as

compliance, academic support, and sport performance units, each with their own norms, knowledge systems, and decision logics (O'Brien & Slack, 2004). While these subcultures enhance expertise and efficiency, they also introduce coordination challenges that require integrative mechanisms such as boundary-spanning administrators and cross-functional collaboration (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015).

Taken together, the organizational design of college athletic departments reflects a dynamic interplay between formal structural dimensions, contextual constraints, and institutional expectations. Centralization, specialization, and formalization provide a foundational framework for understanding how authority, work, and behavior are distributed, yet their expression varies considerably across NCAA divisions due to differences in resources, scale, and environmental demands. While structural variations necessitate adaptive responses to context, shared norms and regulatory pressures also promote structural similarity and legitimacy-seeking behaviors across departments. At the same time, the growing complexity of athletic departments—particularly at the Division I level—has intensified vertical differentiation and expanded the role of mid-level managers, who act as critical intermediaries within increasingly layered hierarchies. Overall, college athletic departments are best understood as hybrid organizational systems in which efficiency, legitimacy, and resource acquisition jointly shape evolving structural arrangements across divisions.

3. Methodology

Research Context

This study is based on the single case study context of Mid-Atlantic University (hereafter referred to as MAU). MAU is a Division II athletic program that engaged in a formal transition of upward reclassification from Division III. Specifically, reclassification is the process where a college or university makes a formal request to the NCAA for a change in division membership. A reclassification from Division III to Division II is particularly novel for multiple reasons. Namely, Division II athletics emphasize competitive success while providing athletic scholarships and maintaining more formalized administrative structures, whereas Division III athletics prohibit athletic scholarships and prioritize broad participation and integration with the academic mission (Masteralexis et al., 2012). Therefore, when athletic programs undertake upward reclassification there is a need for different types of resources to enable college athlete success (Kissinger et al., 2015). As an example, Mitchell and Barrett (2022) established how specialist, athletics-specific support services are needed at the Division II level to better serve college athletes from a mental health and coping perspective.

The MAU case study setting is somewhat unique given how divisional reclassification is not an every-year, every institution phenomenon. But this transition—acknowledged as a strategic driver—necessitated several structural changes within the athletic department. For instance, in transitioning to Division II, MAU was also effectively required to create a new specialized role overseeing the compliance function. This move

responds to the NCAA's requirement that such officers be devoted full-time to compliance duties, or, in other words, compliance officers not occupy a dual role along coaching or other responsibilities (NCAA, 2021a). Additionally, during the divisional reclassification application process, MAU worked with a third-party consultant who advocated for the athletic department to introduce sport supervisors and adopt a sport oversight model (i.e., in Division III all administrators, head coaches, and lead support staff reported directly to the AD). In response, MAU created additional specialized administrative positions through which to delegate both utilitarian and sport supervisory/oversight responsibility. Specifically, MAU went from three full-time administrators and two roles with split coaching and administrative duties in Division III, to seven full-time administrators and only one role with split coaching and administrative duties in Division II (i.e., an increase from five to eight roles with administrative responsibilities). The expanded administrative team sitting beneath the AD in Division II included oversight of all sport programs, as well as functional oversight over personnel, sports information, equipment, game day operations and facilities management, compliance, student-athlete development, development, and fan engagement.

The distinctive circumstances of MAU present an opportunity to compare the structural components of athletic department hierarchies and the experiences of personnel before and after divisional reclassification. Notably, the transition from Division III to Division II involved both decentralization and specialization, as delegating authority and responsibility required the creation of

new specialized positions. Essentially, while divisional reclassification serves as specific rationale for the efforts by MAU to decentralize and specialize their athletic department structure, the time-sensitive nature of the Division II application requirements meant that the structural changes occurred simultaneously, rather than a gradual change process where management implications of such changes become difficult to isolate from everyday business.

Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential research design, which is a form of mixed methods research where an initial quantitative phase is followed by a qualitative phase (Creswell, 2011). An explanatory sequential research design is used when a researcher wants to first identify general patterns or relationships through quantitative data and then explain or further explain those results using qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). More specifically, “the second qualitative phase is often used to explain the results discovered in the first quantitative phase, and sometimes to explain outliers that are not entirely consistent with the collected data” (Toyon, 2021, p. 254).

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase of this study centered on organizational network analysis (ONA), which is a research method that examines the patterns of relationships and interactions among individuals, teams, or units within an organization to understand how information, resources, and influence flow (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, as applied to organizations by Borgatti et al., 2003). This study

adopted a positional ONA, which involves the examination of relationships and interactions between individuals based on their formal positions, roles, or job titles within the organization. When aggregated at the role level, positional ONA allows researchers to examine patterns such as which positions are central to information flow or where coordination bottlenecks exist (Borgatti & Everett, 2006).

The intent of the positional ONA conducted in this study was to visually and quantitatively establish the structural changes that took place through the divisional reclassification process. The alternative to positional ONA is relational ONA, which also examines patterns of relationships among actors within an organization to understand how structures of interaction influence behavior, information flow, and outcomes, but does so by going beyond formal hierarchical positions to capture informal communication flows and influence networks (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). The decision to adopt positional ONA in this study was driven by what Morgan (2007) refers to as methodological pragmatism whereby research methods are chosen—among other factors—based on their suitability to the research context. Specifically, a relational ONA would have required a pre-post method with access to the research participants both before divisional reclassification and after. However, the researchers initiated this study a little over three years following the athletic department’s upward divisional reclassification. In other words, the researchers had concerns over the accuracy and completeness of data collected from organizational personnel attempting to recall day-to-day interactions with colleagues from up to five

years beforehand.

To operationalize the positional ONA, the official organizational charts for the athletic department—inclusive of all part- and full-time athletic department personnel—from both two years prior to and three years following divisional reclassification were converted into a Microsoft Excel edge list based on direct, primary reporting lines (i.e., solid lines representing the hierarchical chain of command between managers and subordinates). The edge list was imported into UCINET where statistical analyses were conducted. To recap, the focus of this quantitative phase was to understand how the overall structure of the athletic department (i.e., network) changed after the introduction of decentralization and specialization. As such, several whole network measures were included within the statistical analysis, such as degree centralization, average geodesic distance, breadth, and compactness. Degree centralization indicates the extent to which connections in the network are concentrated around one or a few highly connected nodes, rather than being evenly distributed across all actors (Freeman, 1979). Alternatively, average geodesic distance represents the average length of the shortest paths between all pairs of nodes in the network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Breadth indicates the extent to which connections are spread across many actors rather than concentrated among a few, consequently capturing whether interaction is broadly shared or narrowly focused (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Finally, compactness reflects how close, on average, all nodes in the network are to one another (Borgatti et al., 2018).

Beyond whole network measures, ONA considers centrality indicators, which are node-level metrics used to assess an actor's position, influence, and importance within a network (Freeman, 1979, as synthesized in Borgatti et al., 2018). Centrality indicators of interest within this study include degree, closeness, betweenness, and eigenvector. Specifically, degree centrality counts the number of direct ties an actor has (Borgatti et al., 2018). Closeness centrality indicators how close an actor is to all others based on the shortest paths in the network (Borgatti et al., 2018). Betweenness centrality captures the extent to which an actor lies on the shortest paths between other actors (Borgatti et al., 2018). Finally, eigenvector centrality assesses not only how many connections an actor has, but also how well connected their contacts are (Borgatti et al., 2018). In addition to generating quantitative metrics of centrality for each actor in each network, a visual network map for each network was created to assist with the interpretation of the quantitative data stemming from the statistical analysis.

Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase of this study included semi-structured interviews with athletic department personnel with direct experience of working within the MAU structures both pre- and post-reclassification. Semi-structured interviews are used to thoroughly investigate participants' perspectives while allowing flexibility for investigation and follow-up questions to generate rich, in-depth data (Kallio et al., 2016). The intent of the semi-structured interviews in this study was to explain, qualitatively, the consequences of the structural

changes that took place through the divisional reclassification process.

Based on the sequential nature of the multiple methods, the positional ONA results informed the semi-structured interview questions. The following interview question provides a general example of the format and type of question asked relating to whole network measures: “The ONA shows that following divisional reclassification the structure has become x. What has been the management consequences of x within the athletic department?” Alternatively, the questions relating to centrality indicators of specific actors in the network were worded as follows: “The ONA shows that following divisional reclassification y role has become z. What has been the management consequences of y becoming z within the athletic department?”

The first-level inclusion criteria for research participants in the qualitative phase were full-time employment status in the athletic department structure both two years prior to and three years after divisional reclassification. The second-level inclusion criteria related to the roles of the research participants. Specifically, the researchers were particularly interested in eliciting data from those personnel who occupied roles as administrators, lead support staff, and head coaches. Including only those with greater seniority in the athletic department was driven by how senior roles involve broader spans of control, cross-unit coordination, and responsibility for tactical decision-making rather than task execution (Mintzberg, 2009; Yukl, 2013). A total of 11 athletic departmental personnel met the inclusion criteria and 10 were successfully recruited and interviewed. The

interviews were conducted in February 2023, lasted between 20 and 35 minutes, and following transcription generated 158 double-spaced pages of textual data.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). After familiarizing themselves with the interview data, two authors independently coded the interviews. Coding was accomplished through open line-by-line reading of transcripts and development of concise labels that identify salient concepts contained within responses. Codes were sorted into potential themes, each of which conceptualizes an underlying pattern of meaning across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were then reviewed by the authors and refined to accurately reflect the meaning of the patterned responses on which they are based (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Potential themes were then clearly defined and named. To strengthen trustworthiness, coding results were then compared to evaluate agreement between coders and adjust as necessary. Agreement was operationalized by comparing coders' assignments line-by-line and meeting to discuss any conflicts (Miles et al., 2014). Coding discrepancies were resolved via consensus. Codes were further refined to reach agreement, resulting in a shared codebook. The finalized codebook was then applied to the remainder of the transcripts until satisfactory reliability was achieved (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Trustworthiness of themes was established using multiple techniques. First, coherence was examined to ensure that data pulled from each theme represents a pattern and that each theme was distinct (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Second, the

credibility of themes was strengthened by reducing bias through discussion of themes among authors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Third, confirmability was established by repeatedly comparing themes to the raw data (interview responses) from which they were generated (Charmaz, 2014).

Table 1

Whole network measures

	Division III	Division II
No. of Nodes	59	91
No. of Ties	116	184
Degree Centralization	0.286	0.102
Average Distance	3.345	4.395
Breadth	0.664	0.739
Compactness	0.336	0.261

Degree Centralization. Although Division II includes more nodes and ties, the Division III network displays substantially higher degree centralization. The higher degree centralization in Division III suggests communications inside this structure were more concentrated around a smaller set of key actors, whereas Division II displays a more decentralized structure with connections spread more uniformly across the network. Within organizational contexts, high degree centralization means that communication, information, and coordination flows through a smaller number of key actors, which creates dependency and vulnerability if those actors are removed (Freeman, 1979, as

4. Results

Quantitative Phase

Whole Network Measures

As shown in Table 1, the whole network measures indicate meaningful differences between the athletic department structures in Division II and III.

synthesized in Borgatti et al., 2018). Whereas low degree centralization indicates a more decentralized network where influence and communication are more broadly distributed (Freeman, 1979, as synthesized in Borgatti et al., 2018). The decentralization in the Division II structure is also visible in the network maps, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Specifically, the Division III structure is noticeably similar to a hub-and-spoke model that is connecting multiple outlying points (spokes) to a single, central node (hub); the epitome of a highly centralized organizational structure.

Figure 1

Division III network map

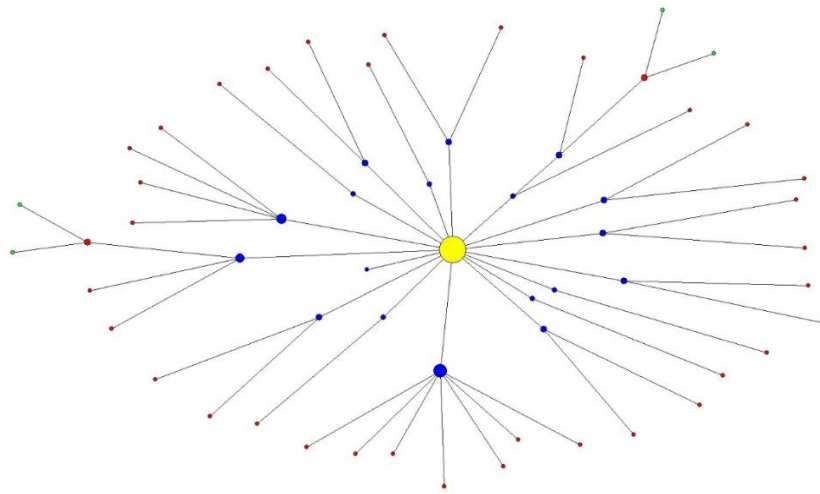
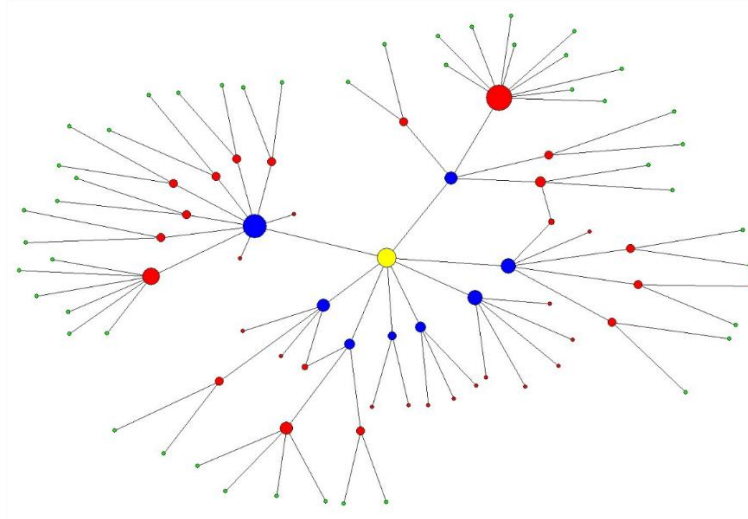


Figure 2

Division II network map



Average Distance and Compactness. The Division III network also shows a shorter average distance where actors can reach one another quickly, as well as higher compactness that is enabling information, resources, or influence to move quickly among actors with relatively few intermediaries (Borgatti et al., 2018). Alternatively,

Division II's longer average distance and lower compactness reflect a larger, more dispersed network in which communication and information flow travels potentially slower and less efficiently (Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Borgatti et al., 2018). These trends are also visible when comparing the network maps (see Figures 1 and 2). In particular,

the nodes are color-coded based on distance from the central actor (i.e., the AD in yellow). Specifically, blue nodes represent actors just one step from the AD (i.e., they have a direct reporting line to the AD), whereas red nodes are two steps and green nodes are three steps removed from the AD. In short, the Division II structure—due to the introduction of additional mid-level managers—has increased the number of green nodes in the network.

Measures of Centrality

While centrality indicators were captured for all actors within each network, Table 2 presents the results of centrality for actors in each network that occupied either administrative, head coaching, or lead support staff roles. Ultimately, the lead administrator is the AD, other administrators are assistant or associate ADs, and lead support staff include roles such as head athletic trainer.

Table 2

Centrality measures for Division III network actors

	Degree	Closeness	Eigenvector	Betweenness
Lead administrator	18	102	0.664	1563
Administrator A	3	151	0.165	219
Administrator B	3	155	0.164	113
Administrator/Head coach A	3	155	0.164	113
Administrator/Head coach B	3	155	0.164	113
Head coach A	3	155	0.164	113
Head coach B	2	157	0.156	57
Head coach C	2	157	0.156	57
Head coach D	8	145	0.227	378
Head coach E	2	157	0.156	57
Head coach F	3	155	0.164	113
Head coach G	2	157	0.156	57
Head coach H	2	157	0.156	57
Head coach I	3	155	0.164	113
Head coach J	1	159	0.148	0
Head coach K	2	157	0.156	57
Head coach L	3	155	0.164	113
Lead support staff A	4	149	0.175	272
Lead support staff B	5	151	0.185	222

Table 3*Centrality measures for Division II network actors*

	Degree	Closeness	Eigenvector	Betweenness
Lead administrator	8	220	0.448	3180
Administrator A	5	268	0.232	1490
Administrator B	5	297	0.182	469
Administrator C	6	284	0.200	894
Administrator D	4	291	0.173	708
Administrator E	10	255	0.450	2013
Administrator F	4	340	0.094	195
Administrator G	7	332	0.202	519
Administrator/Head coach	3	305	0.137	177
Head coach A	3	353	0.071	177
Head coach B	3	353	0.071	177
Head coach C	11	337	0.198	845
Head coach D	3	382	0.056	177
Head coach E	1	386	0.048	0
Head coach F	1	386	0.048	0
Head coach G	3	369	0.061	177
Head coach H	3	369	0.061	177
Head coach I	3	369	0.061	177
Head coach J	3	376	0.053	177
Head coach K	5	372	0.063	350
Head coach L	3	340	0.137	177
Head coach M	3	340	0.137	177
Head coach N	3	340	0.137	177
Head coach O	3	340	0.137	177
Head coach P	3	340	0.137	177
Head coach Q	1	429	0.025	0
Head coach R	1	429	0.025	0
Lead support staff A	4	303	0.149	264
Lead support staff B	6	299	0.180	435

Degree Centrality. In comparing the results across tables, degree centrality is more dispersed in the Division II structure, with multiple administrators and head coaches showing higher degrees than in Division III. This result indicates a Division II network with more distributed connections and less dependency on the AD alone. As such, there are more actors in Division II that are highly visible and active in the network (Borgatti et al., 2018). The nodes in the network maps are sized based on degree centrality. As such, a comparison of the maps clearly shows more nodes with a greater diameter in Division II than in Division III. However, the AD remains the most central actor in both athletic department structures, which indicates that, despite network growth and increased distribution of connections in Division II, the AD remains the pivotal actor for communication, influence, and coordination. The centrality of the AD is clearly visible in the Division III network map (single yellow node in Figure 1) by way of having the node with the largest diameter. However, centrality is considered a combination of all centrality indicators, which is why the AD remains the most central actor in Division II despite how some administrators have higher degree centrality (i.e., nodes with wider diameters) in that organizational arrangement.

Betweenness and Eigenvector Centrality. Another result with consequences for the AD was that betweenness centrality is significantly higher for that role in Division II compared to Division III, indicating that although the network has grown, the lead administrator continues to act as the main broker connecting different parts of the organization. Specifically, in organizations, roles with high

betweenness indicates brokerage or gatekeeping power, as the actor can control or mediate information flow (Borgatti et al., 2018). Finally, some administrators and head coaches in the Division II network show increased eigenvector centrality in comparison to the same role types in Division III, indicating that influence is more spread across additional actors rather than concentrated solely in the AD. Furthermore, this result suggests there are additional roles in the Division II network that have increased influence within well-connected parts of the network (Borgatti et al., 2018).

Overall, the Division II network shows a larger, more dispersed organizational structure with wider interaction among administrators and coaches, while the Division III network is smaller, more centralized, and compact, depending greatly on the AD as the central hub.

Qualitative Phase

Decentralization

At the Division III level, the AD was heavily relied upon in a highly centralized organizational structure (i.e., the AD had 18 direct reports). As one administrator stated, “At Division III [the AD] was never around because he was in 50 different meetings because he was in charge of everything.” Another administrator also commented how “previously everything relied on [the AD] to be here and if it was, you know, a day that [the AD] wasn't here, nothing got done.” Likewise, a coach explained how the AD had “a million different” requests coming from coaches, while also dealing with a similar number of requests from university leadership and other departments on campus. As MAU underwent divisional reclassification, the

AD went from 18 direct reports in Division III to just eight in Division II. This was a result of how one administrator mentioned how authority had been spread out whereby an expanded team of administrators—the sport supervisors—now had the power to make decisions on sport programs.

Three main outcomes of decentralization emerged from the qualitative data: gradual implementation of new decision-making procedures, improved access to decision makers, and changes to the primary focus of the AD.

Gradual Implementation. The delegation of authority that took place as part of the divisional reclassification at MAU was described by interviewees as a gradual and incremental, rather than immediate, change. Part of this change process was the recognition that newly elevated sport supervisors were at different places in their professional development and ability to troubleshoot problems. This also led, as the AD stated, to differences in what each mid-level manager would move up and down the chain. The AD also recognized both his and others' need to have "patience," to allow the sport supervisor to process and resolve problems. With this, there came the understanding that different personnel were now making potentially different—yet appropriate and effective—decisions, which the AD summed up with the following statement:

"You have to let them [sport supervisors] do their way, and the outcome may be slightly different than what you would have wanted. But it is still an acceptable outcome, and it solves the problem."

Another part of this gradual, iterative process was attributed to how the AD had to adjust to "letting go," and learn to trust himself and the sport

supervisors in this new decision-making approach. One administrator described how the AD first distributed the oversight among the sport supervisors but then continued to be there as he slowly stepped back to "allow us to kind of take things on ourselves." The AD mentioned how it was "an act of discipline" to not just do what he did at Division III, which was clearly visible in the following passage:

"What happens is I start to meddle in the areas of these folks and decisions that they've made that are acceptable and are functioning well. If someone gets me into a conversation and I say something that goes awry or different, even if it's five degrees different, I've now blurred the expectations."

One of the administrators interviewed verified how the AD made purposeful attempts not to meddle in sport oversight matters. She stated, "Even if coaches go to [the AD], he deflects them back to the appropriate oversight, so they're used to knowing who to go to for specific issues."

Access to Decision Makers. Multiple interviewees referenced how the Division III centralized structure often resulted in a "long line" of administrators, coaches, and support staff outside the AD's office door. So, a prominent theme or consequence of decentralizing the athletic department's structure was improved access to decision-makers. As one head coach shared, "The availability of an administrator, of a decision maker has increased dramatically because even though my direct report may or may not be available, there are other sort of sub-managers or assistant AD's who could be available to help problem solve." Similarly, an administrator mentioned how "coaches

can go to their sport oversight and don't have to wait in line or to go right directly to the Athletic Director. They have someone they can talk with to hash things out.”

This change has led to a scenario where, as one coach mentioned, “things get done a lot quicker just because he [sport supervisor] only has a certain amount of people that he has to account for.” In fact, one staff member shared how access to a decision-maker is now “immediate.” Furthermore, not only has decentralizing decision-making facilitated quicker decisions, but administrators and coaches are now provided the opportunity, as one administrator noted, to participate in conversations at a “more intimate level.”

Changing Role of the AD. A third consequence of decentralization relates to how the AD role has changed. While the AD retained status as the most central actor in each network, the delegation of authority away from the central node and towards the expanded team of mid-level managers meant the AD became more externally focused on matters of strategic importance (i.e., as one administrator stated, “the big-picture stuff”). This involved, as one staff member noted, an ability now for leadership to “step back and focus their attention on other areas.” Likewise, another administrator stated:

“I feel like he’s [the AD] been able to focus more on big picture stuff...the bigger pieces that are going to keep us going and keep us successful as opposed to the little things. There’s now so much stuff he can take his finger off of and just trust that others can get the job done for him. Now he probably is more accessible because he's focus-

ing on certain few things and is available for a conversation because he's not trying to solve every other problem.”

An exception to this rule existed, however, whenever an issue materializes that involves the external constituency of the university, such as other schools, the conference, parents, or officials. In these cases, as one head coach pointed out, “still go through the AD.”

These changes to the AD role were intended and expected. In fact, the AD noted how at the Division I level the AD’s role focuses more on the external pieces, which leaves the deputy AD running the day-to-day operations. This qualitative finding aligned fully with the quantitative findings whereby one of the administrators, who happened to be the next most senior administrator beyond the AD, had higher degree centrality in the Division II structure.

Specialization

As a Division III athletic program, MAU coaches often occupied more generalized roles. For instance, one administrator explained how it was “mostly the case where every head coach typically had a second duty, and some of those second duties were larger than others.” Another administrator reiterated this same sentiment through the following statement, “In the Division III model you were the coach and you’re also doing academics, you're also doing fundraising, you're also doing your own compliance to some extent.” Among other additional duty expectations for coaches in Division III included strength and conditioning, game day administration, as well as initiating community service-based efforts. This created a

scenario, according to one administrator, where coaches “wear more than one hat.” So, as part of the transition to Division II, and as one administrator explained, MAU put “in place more administrative positions” that pulled “some of the things that were previously done in sports programs by head coaches” and put these under an assistant AD or coordinator. In fact, another administrator referred to this change as the “biggest” within the divisional reclassification process.

Nevertheless, two themes related to specialization were apparent through the semi-structured interviews: professionalization of functional areas, and prioritization of coaching duties by coaches.

Professionalization of Functional Areas. The changes to job roles facilitated by specialization have allowed administrators and coaches alike, as one coach stated, to specialize and focus on their respective work area, with athletic department employees now having “less to do” in terms of the scope of their work. In addition, the interviewees referenced how this specialization was helping to improve performance as these functional areas have been “elevated and given some direction.” One administrator echoed this sentiment by sharing how, as the department has added more administrator positions, “we’ve been able to not just touch on areas but really dive into them and get more specialized in those areas.” In totality, the specialized Division II structure was believed by interviewees to be facilitating, as the AD explained, “a full, well-rounded experience” that better meets the needs of student-athletes.

Prioritization of Coaching Duties. The change to more specialized coaching roles was explained by one administrator as stemming from “the fact

that as a Division II institution, coaches now have more time to spend with student athletes per the NCAA rules on actual athletic skill development and personal growth in that area.” Simply put, the role of the coach in the Division II structure necessitated an approach where coaches became free to coach. On this, an administrator commented, “Looking at these coaches that are coming in under the Division II umbrella, it’s just much more of ‘hey, I’m here to recruit and coach lacrosse. I’m here to recruit and coach basketball. I’m here to recruit and coach football.’” As a particularly illustrative example of the resulting impact, one female coach stated, “Even the girls made a comment the other day about how many more recruit visits we’ve had this Spring in comparison to last because again I have more time to reply to recruits and do all that kind of stuff.” Another coach claimed the changes prompted more of a “team first” mentality to his approach where his focus is on, for instance, planning practices.

5. Discussion

Conceptual Model

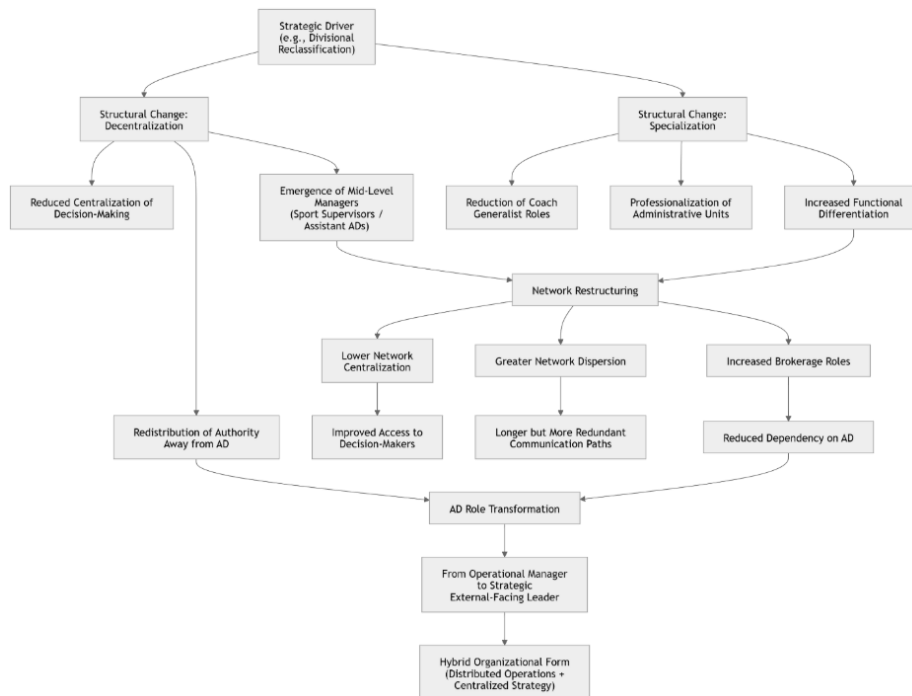
The conceptual model presented in Figure 3 illustrates how a strategic driver, such as divisional reclassification, initiates a cascading set of organizational changes that reshape both formal structure and communication patterns within athletic departments. At the foundation of the model, the strategic driver acts as an exogenous catalyst that prompts simultaneous shifts in decentralization and specialization. Increases in decentralization occur when AD control is spread further through the organization by moving decision-making

power to mid-level managers (i.e., sport supervisors, assistant ADs), thus decreasing centralization and increasing the number of people involved in the athletic department's decision-making process. Increases in specialization occur when jobs

within the athletic department become more refined as coaches focus on the specific sport and administration/support become more professionalized.

Figure 3

Conceptual model: Structural reconfiguration of athletic departments through decentralization, specialization, and network restructuring



Strategic drivers of organizational change also cause network restructuring to occur. These network-level changes generate several downstream outcomes, including improved access to decision-makers, more redundant and resilient communication pathways, and a reduced dependency on the AD as the sole conduit of information and authority. It should be noted that a sub-Division I enabling structure does not mean the absence of centralization. The AD is likely still structurally central but can now operate as a more strategic leader with less burden on their routine decision-making.

Ultimately, increased decentralization and specialization likely leads to a hybrid form of organizational control, including a combination of efficient coordination and centralized strategic control. The conceptual model furnishes both theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this research provides two main contributions. First, it advances organizational structure theory and network analysis by providing empirical evidence that formal structural

changes (i.e., decentralization and specialization) are realized on the network level through specific patterns of change in network topology. Rather than viewing structure and networks as distinct outcomes to be explained, variation in decentralization and specialization are systematically associated with different configurations of communication centralization and brokerage roles as structure is translated into action. In doing so, this model offers one means of overcoming what has been described as a persistent and unproductive divide between structural contingency approaches to organizations and sociologically-oriented relational/network perspectives (Mintzberg, 1979; Scott & Davis, 2015; Galaskiewicz, 2011; Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). In doing so, the model aligns with scholarship arguing that organizational networks are embedded within and constrained by formal structures, while also constituting a mechanism through which structure is enacted in practice (Nohria & Eccles, 1992; Brass et al., 2004).

The findings presented in this research therefore compliments prior work arguing organizational networks both reproduce and/or constrain formal structure (Nohria & Eccles, 1992; Brass et al., 2004) suggesting that formal and informal structures are deeply embedded and evolve together over time through ongoing relational processes (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). This research also shows that though organizational structure is “embodied” in network patterns of communication among organizational actors, it is also dynamically reproduced by these communication patterns over time (Krackhardt, 1990; Cross & Parker, 2004). Conceptually, this means that formal structure should not only be viewed as

something that exists, but something that is done.

Second, by showing that centralization and decentralization are related yet independent strategies of administrative organizing, this study adds to the literature on hybrid organizational forms by providing empirical support for the notion that athletic departments rely on both integration logics simultaneously. Rather than become more decentralized as they grow and differentiate, athletic departments appear to hybridize their formal structures by adding additional layers of mid-management. In doing so, departments maintain centralized authority over their top administrators to better coordinate departmental activities and account for athletic program performance while distributing decision-making authority to lower levels of the organizational hierarchy to become more responsive and operationally efficient.

Prior research has noted that athletic departments are hybrid governance forms in that they possess several layers of administrators that split up functional responsibilities while maintaining control at the top (Hums & Barr, 1999; Chelladurai, 2017). The present study uniquely contributes to this discussion by showing that departments also hybridize their formal structures to respond to varying demands placed on the department by both becoming more centralized and decentralized at the same time. This builds from established organizational theory on structural differentiation and integration by showing how increased specialization in college sport organizations can also generate greater centralization in decision-making to maintain coordination and control (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Mintzberg, 1979; Chelladurai,

2017). This interpretation of departmental structure aligns with the broader notion put forth in organizational theory that hybrid organizational forms often emerge when organizations are subjected to competing institutional logics and resource pressures, not when they transition from “simple” to “complex” or “bureaucratic” structures (Greenwood et al., 2011; Battilana & Lee, 2014).

Athletic departments face many competing logics and accountabilities such as remaining true to the educational mission of the university, following the commercial logic of big-time sport, responding to regulatory pressures from multiple stakeholders, and maintaining accountability to university administrators. Thus, athletic departments operate at the intersection of professional service organization, commercial enterprise, and academic department (Slack & Parent, 2006; Washington & Patterson, 2011). The partially centralized-decentralized hybrid form allows departments to push some decision-making authority downward to respond to athletes’ and coaches’ needs while maintaining strategic control of the department at the top. Increases in specialization and formalization do not decrease centralization because control is still retained at the top of the organization by the AD. Instead, the result is the creation of mid-level managers who have more control over the day-to-day functions of athletic departments. Therefore, this research shows that athletic departments are hybrid structures that distribute authority while maintaining control at multiple levels.

Practical Implications

From a practical (and generalized) standpoint, the findings of this study suggest that sub-Division I athletic departments may benefit from the introduction of an enabling structure, which can allow more rapid decision-making, increased engagement with external constituencies, and improved student-athlete experience. However, the study also identifies major challenges associated with transitioning from a simple to an enabling structure. To start, there are questions relating to the AD skillset and their ability to manage and lead in a decentralized athletic department structure if accustomed to operating exclusively in centralized structures. Someone accustomed to managing in a centralized organizational structure may not automatically be successful in a decentralized one, because the skills, decision-making habits, and communication behaviors required differ significantly. In centralized structures, leaders retain most authority and make most decisions, whereas decentralized systems distribute decision making throughout middle managers or teams (Daft, 2016). Managers used to central control may struggle to empower subordinates, facilitate lateral communication, and guarantee uniformity without direct oversight (Robbins & Coulter, 2018). Success in decentralized structures also depends on trust and effective delegation, which may be challenging for those accustomed to micromanaging (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Experience in centralized systems does not automatically translate to decentralized effectiveness; managers must learn to balance autonomy, oversight, and accountability, frequently necessitating training, mentoring, and gradual exposure to new decision-

making procedures (Mintzberg, 1979).

ADs transitioning to roles at a higher NCAA division face major challenge. For instance, they have to manage more intricate regulatory compliance requirements, manage larger staff and budgets, and oversee expanded student-athlete services while continuing to have program competitiveness (Covell & Barr, 2010; Southall et al., 2019). Additionally, these directors often need to shift their focus from day-to-day team management to wider strategic planning and external relations, balancing internal supervision with heightened expectations from university leadership and stakeholders (Shilbury et al., 2020). As a result, the transferability of an AD's experience in a small, centralized Division III athletic department has questionable relevance within larger, decentralized athletic department structures, unless the AD is aware of the contextual differences and makes deliberate efforts to modify their management and leadership approach.

Beyond the inherent and learned abilities of the central most actor across these networks (i.e., the AD), this investigation underscored the importance of an incremental approach when making changes to athletic department structures. Research indicates that making organizational structure changes too quickly can create several major disadvantages. Rapid structural change can lead to employee confusion and role ambiguity, since individuals might not fully understand new reporting lines, responsibilities, or decision-making authority (Burke, 2017). It may also interfere with well-developed communication channels and workflows, decreasing effectiveness and increasing the probability of mistakes or overlooked tasks

(Kotter, 1996). Additionally, rapid change may generate resistance from employees, as people often need time to adapt psychologically and develop confidence in new procedures (Piderit, 2000).

Furthermore, within a gradual change process, institutional knowledge is critically important. Such institutional knowledge provides continuity, context, and expertise that help the organization adapt without losing operational effectiveness. Employees with deep institutional knowledge understand earlier determinations, informal practices, and organizational culture, which allows them to foresee difficulties, guide new staff, and ensure that changes are implemented smoothly (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Argote & Ingram, 2000). Without exploiting this knowledge, structural changes may lead to workflow inefficiencies, miscommunication, and loss of critical tacit knowledge, undermining both short-term operations and sustained strategic objectives (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). As such, structural changes in college athletic departments—such as a move from a simple to an enabling structure—cannot be made in isolation of the individuals who constitute the existing network. Doing so could leave key knowledge gaps within the organization, not only in relation to defined roles and functions, but also in terms of more informal knowledge transfer within the organization. Notably, college athletic departments rely heavily on informal networks and interdepartmental cooperation—for example, between coaches, compliance staff, and marketing personnel—to manage daily operations and external demands, showing how formal organizational charts coexist with relational dynamics in practice

(Chelladurai, 2017).

Additionally, the resulting hybrid organization requires a relatively large department in terms of personnel to implement. In the case of MAU, the positional ONA revealed how the number of nodes (so employees) increased in the network from 59 to 91. Likewise, one interviewee who occupied a position as a lead within a support staff area noted, “We’ve definitely put more eggs in our athletics basket.” Research shows that smaller organizations tend to centralize authority because a small number of competent managers can efficiently make decisions without added complexity (Perez-Reynosa & Iranzo Sancho, 2012). In these cases, decentralizing authority may cause unwarranted layers of approval, reduce clarity regarding accountability, and slow down processes that would otherwise be handled quickly by a central decision-maker (Altamimi & Jimenez, 2022).

Relatedly, an enabling structure at the sub-Division I level likely only works when other resources accompany the changes to the way human resources are structured. Interviewees at MAU discussed a possible resource lag where the resources needed to optimize fully specialized roles had not “caught up.” Research shows that specialization must be aligned with budgetary, technological, and managerial support to translate into strengthened organizational performance (Daft, 2016; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Without resources, specialization may become symbolic rather than functional. However, the authors acknowledge that this practical implication is likely more specific to the context of an athletic department undertaking an upward divisional re-

classification (like MAU) and is perhaps not generalizable across other contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the managerial consequences of increasing decentralization and specialization in an athletic department at the sub-Division I level. The findings suggest that adopting an enabling structure redistributed decision-making authority across a broader set of actors, improved access to decision makers, and enabled greater functional specialization among administrators and coaches. These changes allowed the AD to focus more on strategic and external priorities while permitting coaches and administrators to concentrate more fully on their respective functional areas. Ultimately, decentralization and specialization led to a hybrid organizational form.

As athletic departments navigate the changing athlete demands (i.e. mental health), and NCAA regulatory pressures (i.e. the new NIL legislation), similar hybrid organizational forms may enhance responsiveness to these ever-changing dynamics. Decentralization through the redistribution of decision-making authority can improve athlete access to administrators and allow the AD to focus on other external priorities (such as the increase in need for acquiring development funds for growing athletic budgets). At the same time, the findings highlight that decentralization introduces new coordination demands, particularly in maintaining consistent communication and alignment across all specialized units. This is especially relevant in contemporary college athletics, where NIL policies, revenue-sharing models, and expanded stu-

dent-athlete services require much more flexibility.

Despite these findings, the authors recognize how the single-case design could limit the generalizability of the findings. Yet, the methodological pragmatism driving the decision to conduct a positional ONA in an athletic department that is structurally comparable to other collegiate athletic departments arguably enhances the generalizability of findings by focusing on formal role-based relationships (i.e., positions such as AD, assistant ADs, and coaches) rather than context-specific interaction patterns unique to a single organization. In contrast, a relational ONA, which captures idiosyncratic, person-to-person communication ties and informal interaction dynamics, would embed a high degree of contextual specificity that is difficult to replicate across settings, thereby limiting the transferability of findings beyond the focal case. Structuring the semi-structured interview questions around the positional ONA further supported generalizability by anchoring participants' reflections to standardized role-based relationships and formal organizational positions, rather than to individual-specific interactions or context-dependent experiences that would be less comparable across athletic departments.

Future research should continue to examine how variations in organizational structure influence decision-making, resource allocation, and organizational effectiveness across different institutional contexts within intercollegiate athletics. Such work is particularly timely as universities confront increasing financial pressures and struc-

tural change across the evolving landscape of college sport, particularly among smaller universities who are facing unprecedented budget pressures caused by financial and enrollment challenges (Robertson et al., 2024). Additionally, such work is also timely within the upper echelons of college sport where new General Manager roles are increasingly blurring the lines between organizational structures in collegiate versus professional sport (Zenor & Russo, 2024).

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