NCAA Scores for its Diversity Hiring

With the annual NCAA basketball tournaments now in full swing, a new report on diversity hiring in college athletics gives high marks to efforts at the organization’s headquarters. What lessons can be learned from the college ranks?

By Michael O'Brien

For organizations trying to turn their diversity initiatives from an air ball to a slam dunk, they should look to the National Collegiate Athletics Association for guidance.

According to a new report by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports at the University of Central Florida's College of Business Administration, the NCAA headquarters in Indianapolis scored an "A" grade for its racial-hiring practices and an "A+" for its diversity issues.

In that report, college sport in general increased its grade for racial-hiring practices from a "C+" to a "B," while maintaining a "solid B" for gender-hiring practices, giving it an overall grade of a "B."

Richard Lapchick, director of the institute and author of the study, along with Brian Hoff and Christopher Kaiser, says the report shows that, while progress can indeed be seen among college programs, clearly more can be done when it comes to diversity efforts.

For 25 years, Lapchick says, he's been compiling such grades using a points system based on federal affirmative-action race and gender policies that suggest work environments should reflect the percentage of corresponding groups in general population.

Thus, according to the report, if 24 percent of the general population are people of color, then "an 'A' was achieved if 24 percent of [an organization's] positions were held by people of color, 'B' if 12 percent of the positions were held by people of color, 'C' if it had only 9 percent, a 'D' if it was at least 6 percent and 'F' for anything below that."

The NCAA headquarters got the only 'A' in the college report card because of "several factors that ... would be lessons that other HR leaders could follow and look at as models, including leadership buy-in," Lapchick says.

"From the top, with both [former NCAA president] Myles Brand and now [current president] Mark Emmert, the leadership at the NCAA stresses the importance of the diverse staff of the NCAA," he says. "It went from being a largely all-boys' club in the mid-1900s to one that functions in such a way that earned it that 'A'."

The organization also embarked on a series of "impactful" diversity initiatives, he says, including "an increased focus on policy development, specifically looking at how policies can inform decision-making in terms of creating more inclusive environments."

Other initiatives named in the report include "a greater affiliation and increased collaboration with other national organizations and associations that either have diversity and inclusion as a primary mission or, like the NCAA, have some aspect of diversity and inclusion within their core principles."

The NCAA headquarters did not return our phone calls seeking comment for this story.

Lapchick says he would advise HR leaders who are looking to increase their diversity hires "to adopt a policy within your organization that makes it mandatory that there is a diverse pool of candidates and a diverse selection committee that is involved in screening the applicants."

"This has been the key to the changes at the professional level with the adoption of such rules," he says, referring to the National Football League's mandate that minority candidates be included whenever a team has an open staff position.

Beth Schroeder, a partner in the employment-law department at Silver & Freedman, a business-law firm in Los
Angeles, says the challenge for HR is to convince hiring managers to go along with diversity-hiring initiatives.

"People tend to hire people that are like them, because that's what they're used to," she says. "Management becomes resentful when they feel like they're forced to bring someone in that's a 'token.'"

Jennifer Melton, the EEO/diversity management consultant for F&H Solutions Group in Atlanta, says that, while the report card shows "admirable" gains in diversity hiring in collegiate athletics, the total picture is not as positive.

"One must delve much deeper into the report and analyze the accompanying report cards to recognize that the resulting data is truly a great disappointment where the career advancement of women and minorities in leadership roles is concerned," she says.

In fact, she says, the report cards are "a clear indication that the NCAA's initiatives have failed miserably in its targeted objective: to successfully achieve the metrics expected through these valiant efforts across all levels of the enterprise."

The report does note that all the top-level athletic conferences' commissioners are white men, and only 8.3 percent of Division I athletics directors are women, which led in part to an 'F' grade in those categories in the report.

In light of the increasingly global society, she says, "the apparent lack of diversity reflected in the resulting statistics in the area of college sports ... is staggering," adding that these statistics are not unlike those reported in today's corporate work environment.

"Many organizations make the fatal mistake of establishing a diversity council to assist and develop robust diversity initiatives for their company -- but fail to adequately benchmark [or] establish metrics around their efforts and monitor the results on a regular basis," she says.

Melton says it is "incumbent upon HR leaders to develop their hiring practices with the mind-set that they are not only seeking to build a diverse team -- but one enriched with individuals who have demonstrated the knowledge and experience to assume leadership roles in the near future.

"Regardless of whether these hiring practices are in the locker room or the boardroom, one cannot rely solely on the success of diversity initiatives alone to achieve that objective," she says.

Lapchick agrees.

"Whatever the organization's business, diversity has become a business imperative," he says. "If we are going to market our product or what we do to broad populations across communities and the United States, we are going to be in contact with a population base that is shifting rapidly and is increasingly diverse.

"If they see that diversity is important in your organization, then they would be more inclined to want to do business with your organization," he says. "A diverse staff means that you will have more ideas to choose from, more creativity and a richer atmosphere in general."

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