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The Evolving Institutional Work of the National Collegiate Athletic Association to Maintain Dominance in a Fragmented Field

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1 Running Head: INSTITUTIONAL WORK AND NCAA

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9 The evolving institutional work of the National Collegiate Athletic Association to maintain

10 dominance in a fragmented field

11 **Abstract**

12 High-profile sport governance associations tend to remain intact despite numerous issues that
13 would predict their demise. As such, these types of associations offer valuable contexts for
14 understanding institutional maintenance work. The authors conducted a historical case study of
15 the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the U.S. More than 7000 pages of
16 documents spanning more than 100 years were analyzed to document how the NCAA rose to
17 dominance in a contested field and cemented its governance as the taken-for-granted model of
18 collegiate and amateur sport in the U.S. despite numerous issues that would predict the
19 association's demise. Findings suggest that the NCAA evolved its methods for controlling
20 institutional boundaries, practices, and cognitions as means for maintaining its dominance. By
21 expanding its boundaries, adjusting its practices, and framing member and public cognitions, the
22 NCAA has been able to create an institution that is responsive to members and defensible against
23 legitimate contestations.

24 **Keywords:** Institutional theory, Institutional work, College athletics, Sport Governance

25 1. Introduction

26 Sport tends to be organized by associations that provide structure and rules for
27 competition, regulate transactions among organizations, and provide frameworks of cognition
28 within a given sport context (Kikulis, 2000). The governance of these associations tends to
29 become institutionalized with the actual governing bodies becoming institutions in their own
30 right. That is, they become “organization[s] infused with value” (Selznick, 1957, p. 17) that
31 provide “shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their
32 appropriate activities or relationships” (Barley & Tolbert, 1997, p. 96). Especially at the highest
33 levels of competition, sport governing bodies tend to remain in control of their various domains
34 for extensive periods of time. In fact, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Fédération
35 Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), International Cricket Council (ICC), and World
36 Rugby have all governed for well over 100 years and have become dominant institutions within
37 their contexts. This pattern is interesting and somewhat unusual as institutionalized associations
38 and governance structures tend to be somewhat volatile and prone to change (Hinings,
39 Greenwood, Reay, & Suddaby, 2004).

40 The inclusion of institutional theory in sport management research has proven useful for
41 both explaining sport phenomena and for extending understandings of institutions (Washington
42 & Patterson, 2011). Sport management scholars have examined various institutional topics, such
43 as organizational responses to shifting institutional logics (Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013;
44 O’Brien & Slack, 2003, 2004; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Washington & Ventresca, 2008),
45 impacts of institutional change (Heinze & Lu, 2017; Kikulis, 2000; Skille, 2011; Slack &
46 Hinings, 1992), and institutional work (Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2015;
47 Nite, 2017; Nite & Washington, 2017; Woolf, Berg, Newland, & Green, 2016). Given their

48 longevity and seeming resistance to institutional upheaval, the institutional structures and
49 processes of engrained sport associations offer interesting contexts of inquiry. Arguably, many of
50 the most high-profile sport associations have even sown what Garud, Jain, and Kumaraswamy
51 (2002) termed “seeds of self-destruction” (p. 196). That is, they have been embroiled in
52 legitimacy crises (e.g. Wagner, 2011; Wagner & Pedersen, 2014), scandals (e.g. Donaghy,
53 2010), and contradictory logics (e.g. Nite & Bopp, 2017; Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall,
54 2008). However, many high-profile sport governance associations tend to endure and maintain
55 their dominance, which seems to counter popular organizational theorizations of institutional
56 change (see Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Hinings et al., 2004; Seo & Creed, 2002).

57 One governance association that has become an institution in its own right is the National
58 Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which governs the majority of intercollegiate sport in
59 the U.S. Whereas sport is structured somewhat differently in the U.S. compared to most
60 international settings, the case of the NCAA offers insight into how an association builds
61 institutional structures and maintains those despite elements that organizational theorists have
62 suggested should result in substantial changes of governance in the field. Thus, the purpose of
63 this study was to examine how the NCAA has remained intact despite predictors of institutional
64 change. We detail the processes whereby the NCAA seized control of a fragmented field,
65 institutionalized its governance in the field of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S., and remained
66 institutionalized despite contradictory logics, divergent internal interest groups, and vociferous
67 contestations from external contenders. Drawing upon the tenets of institutional work, we
68 collected nearly 100 years of documents spanning various periods of growth and instability of
69 the NCAA within U.S. intercollegiate athletics. In doing so, we provide a more complete
70 understanding of how institutions maintain despite seeds of change.

71 The results of our historical examination suggest that the NCAA learned to maintain
72 control over the field of college athletics by learning how to control boundaries, practices,
73 cognitions of the institutional properties. Our research offers extensions to a burgeoning body of
74 institutional work research within sport management. We move beyond recognizing the
75 importance of institutional work in building and maintaining sport institutions (see Dowling &
76 Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Nite & Washington, 2017; Woolf et al., 2016) by
77 outlining the how institutional work evolves in to address various tensions. Although the
78 specifics of our research are contextually bound, we contend that the evolution of institutional
79 work exhibited by the NCAA provides relevant insights for understanding the endurance of other
80 dominant sport governing bodies.

81 **2. Theoretical framework**

82 We draw from the traditions of institutional theory and the emergence of institutional
83 work (Washington & Patterson, 2011). We understand institutions as “more or less taken-for-
84 granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive
85 understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social
86 order” (Greenwood et al., 2008, pp. 4–5). Whereas early work in the institutional theory tradition
87 examined how social order was self-reproduced, recent research has drawn upon concept of
88 embedded agency (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Holm, 1995, Seo & Creed, 2002,
89 Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006, Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Embedded agency entails, “how
90 actors whose thoughts and actions are constrained by institutions are nevertheless able to work to
91 affect those institutions” (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 189). Built on this notion, scholars have
92 described institutional work as “purposive actions carried out by individual and collective actors
93 to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 52). Some

94 institutional scholars have regarded maintenance as the uncontested, taken-for-granted
95 reproduction of institutional scripts (Jepperson, 1991), yet the institutional work lens indicates
96 that maintenance may not be a stable property of the institutional order and various forms of
97 work are necessary to ensure institutional continuity and stability (Micelotta & Washington,
98 2013).

99 Scholars have theorized the fleeting stability of institutionalized structures and patterns of
100 governance (Hinings, Greenwood, Reay, & Suddaby, 2004). Instability can be attributed to a
101 host of factors, such as changing political environments (King & Pearce, 2010), evolving
102 industry standards (Ahmadjian & Robinson, 2001), conflicting logics and interests among
103 stakeholders (Seo & Creed, 2002), along with scandals and organizational corruption (Misangyi,
104 Weaver, & Elms, 2008). These may result in fissures in the institutional fabric that may be
105 exploited by change agents seeking to create more favorable arrangements better suited to their
106 interests (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In this
107 regard, institutional change may seem unavoidable; however, dominant organizations and
108 powerful institutions do not simply yield to change efforts. Actors benefitting from existing
109 institutional arrangements work to maintain prevailing institutional practices and norms
110 (Fligstein, 2001; Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Yet, some have even
111 shown that efforts to maintain and institutionalize result in “seeds of self-destruction” (Garud et
112 al., 2002, p. 196; see also Seo and Creed, 2002). Lawrence (1999), as well as Zietsma and
113 Lawrence (2010), noticed that efforts to control institutional boundaries and membership created
114 tensions that could result in the instabilities. This pattern would then suggest an inevitability of
115 an institution’s demise. Theoretically this might be true. However, conceptualizing institutional
116 change as an unending cycle is problematic, considering anecdotal evidence that suggests some

117 institutions have sustained despite inherent instabilities. In short, as was argued more than 20
118 years ago, “We need better information about the life course of institutions” (Scott, 1995, p. 146)
119 to better understand why some institutions overcome challenges and persist despite opposition
120 while others falter.

121 The sport industry is well positioned to offer insight into institutional longevity. Globally,
122 numerous sport organizations, leagues, and institutions have remained in operation despite
123 engrained elements and various circumstances that would predict change. For instance, the IOC
124 and FIFA have endured embezzlement and bribery scandals (Maennig, 2005; Pielke, 2013). The
125 IOC has also faced legitimacy crises with numerous athlete doping scandals that led to the
126 formation of the World Anti-Doping Agency (Wagner, 2011; Wagner & Pedersen, 2014). U.S.
127 sport leagues have endured issues of illicit gambling of officials and players (Donaghy, 2010;
128 Ostertag, 1992), performance enhancing drugs (Mitchell, 2007), and issues related to player
129 safety (Sagerian, 2012). Other sport organizations, such as the NCAA in the U.S., are influenced
130 by conflicting institutional logics and stakeholders with divergent agendas (Nite & Bopp, 2017;
131 Southall et al., 2008; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). These types of issues constitute seeds of
132 change that may provide opportunities for other sport institutions to be established; yet, many
133 high-profile sport entities have been able to maintain institutional dominance in their respective
134 contexts. With the current study, we endeavor to provide insight into how and why some sport
135 institutions have endured despite institutional elements that would predict institutional upheaval.

136 **3. Empirical context**

137 Our research was situated within the context of intercollegiate and amateur sport in the
138 U.S. Specifically, we examined the NCAA and the actions taken to solidify its dominance within
139 this context. We argue that the NCAA has evolved into an institution. The NCAA is a collection

140 of processes and practices that result in the taken for granted notion that colleges should engage
141 in sport. The notion of the NCAA gives rise to sport conferences, rules with regards to
142 amateurship, revenue sharing among college conferences as well as who is eligible to play and
143 organize college sport. In short, we argue that the NCAA defines the appropriate activities and
144 relationships among member colleges in regards to collegiate athletics (Barley & Tolbert 1997,
145 p. 96).

146 Within the sport management literature, research on the NCAA has become somewhat
147 commonplace, especially among those studying sport institutions (see Nite, 2017; Nite &
148 Washington, 2017; Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008; Walker, Seifried, & Soebbing,
149 2017; Washington 2004; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). Despite its common usage as an
150 institutional research context, the NCAA was particularly suited for this inquiry for multiple
151 reasons. First, there is an abundance of internal and external documentation of its history as it has
152 taken place in the public eye. Secondly, the NCAA's dominance is particularly interesting
153 because institutional theorists have noticed that institutional change is predictable given the types
154 of challenges the NCAA has faced throughout its history. Scholars, media pundits, watchdog
155 organizations, and even the U.S. government have levied harsh criticisms on the NCAA's
156 governance and underlying philosophy of amateur college athletics. The NCAA has faced
157 various calls for reform (e.g. Benford, 2007; Gurney, 2009), litigation of its rules (e.g. *NCAA v.*
158 *Board of Regents; O'Bannon v. NCAA*), organizations attempting to institute new forms of
159 governance (e.g National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics; Amateur Athletic Union), and
160 scathing attacks to its core ethos (e.g. Southall et al., 2008; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013;
161 Sperber, 2000; Staurowsky & Sack, 2005). Despite these challenges, the NCAA has remained
162 the primary governing body of college athletics. As we trace the life-course of the NCAA, it is

163 necessary to account for the early history of amateur sport and intercollegiate athletics in the
164 U.S.

165 Although colleges were engaged in intramural as well as intercollegiate athletics before
166 the founding of the NCAA, the NCAA became the typification of the “collegiate way” in terms
167 of how colleges should engage in sports. Intercollegiate athletic competition first occurred in the
168 mid-1850s when Harvard competed against Yale in crew. Colleges and universities, along with
169 their alumni and student bodies, recognized the benefits of pride and visibility associated with
170 athletic competitions. One writer suggested in the 1864 Yale literary magazine that winning the
171 crew championships was “sacredly connected with the glory of alma mater herself” (as cited in
172 Smith, 1988, p. 13). Colleges and universities began to utilize their athletics programs, primarily
173 football, as means for increasing visibility and esprit de corps (Washington, 2004).

174 As athletics continued to grow, numerous entities (e.g., conferences, councils, and
175 individual universities) attempted to organize competitions yet were confronted with tenuous
176 debates regarding implementation of rule structures for football and other sports. Yale and
177 Princeton played under rules that were more similar to soccer while Harvard used rules that were
178 more similar to rugby. During the first football game between Harvard and Yale in 1875, Yale
179 conceded to using Harvard’s rules (Washington, 1999). Although Yale won that game and the
180 next 14 in a row, the Harvard rules became institutionalized during the creation of the
181 Intercollegiate Football Association. Some schools resisted and eventually left the IFA (Falla,
182 1981), resulting in different universities operating with different rule sets. In efforts to
183 consolidate, Cornell, Harvard, Navy, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale formed the American
184 Football Rules Committee. However, the committee was met with resistance, as schools in the
185 West did not like the rules from this entity. The discussion led to seven schools forming what is

186 now the Big Ten Conference (in 1895 and the Ivy League formed in 1898; Stagg, 1946). The
187 primary concern with the rules was the violent nature of early football, with some seasons had as
188 many as 44 deaths (Leifer, 1995). The early attempts at quelling the violence resulted in less
189 entertaining football for the fans (Stagg, 1946). Ultimately, schools reverted back to more
190 entertaining styles of football despite the occurrence of more player deaths.

191 In 1905, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt had called a meeting with Yale, Harvard,
192 and Princeton to discuss rules for curtailing the violence in football (Smith, 1988). President
193 Roosevelt also warned these schools of government intervention if the brutal play was not
194 addressed, yet none of the institutions followed his suggestions. By the end of that year,
195 numerous serious injuries, including the death Harold Moore of Union College led to a meeting
196 between 62 colleges and universities with President Roosevelt to discuss brutality in football
197 (Flath, 1963). In addressing the attendees, President Roosevelt stated,

198 [H]e liked the game (football), but felt that something should be done to reform the rules,
199 especially in the interest of fair play and discouragement of rough play, and asked them
200 to undertake to start a movement to that end (front page New York Times October 10,
201 1905).

202 The meeting ultimately led to the formation of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association which, in
203 1910, changed its name to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (Stagg, 1946).

204 Since establishing its authority, the NCAA has defended both its governance and the
205 legitimacy of the intercollegiate model from various challengers on multiple fronts. The earliest
206 contestations to its authority emerged from a rival organization, the Amateur Athletic Union
207 (AAU). The AAU and the NCAA battled for control over high-profile amateur sporting events
208 (i.e. men's college basketball) and Olympic endorsement (Flath, 1963). Other organizations,

209 namely the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), competed with the NCAA
210 for membership from universities. Further, technological advances endangered the revenue
211 streams and led to extensive legal issues between the NCAA and its members, thereby
212 endangering the viability of the field (Nite & Washington, 2017). Despite these numerous
213 contestations from different challengers, the NCAA has maintained its position of power through
214 strategic actions. As such, our study was guided by the broad research question of how has the
215 NCAA remained the dominant institution in U.S. intercollegiate athletics despite elements that
216 would predict institutional change?

217 **4. Method**

218 We designed the research as a historical case study of the NCAA's dominance in
219 collegiate and amateur sport within the U.S. The approach is especially appropriate when
220 studying institutions, as scholars have advocated for studying the life course of institutions
221 (Scott, 1995). Indeed, previous researchers have recognized the utility of this approach for
222 understanding various facets of institutionalization within different fields, including college
223 athletics (see Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003; Washington, 2004; Washington &
224 Ventresca, 2004, 2008). These methods were particularly appropriate because understanding of
225 social actions requires researchers to consider how social contexts in which actors are embedded
226 evolve over time (Kieser, 1994). Historical case study methods capture the evolving contours
227 that characterized the different stages of institutional developments.

228 **4.1 Data sources**

229 To understand the maintenance work of the NCAA, we compiled archived documents
230 and numerous historical accounts of the NCAA, college athletics, and amateur sport in the U.S.
231 from various sources. Consulting multiple sources from various authors was necessary

232 considering historical accounts often reflect the biases of the narrators, and records might not
233 provide complete accounts of events due to the scope and focus of authors (Kieser, 1994;
234 Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). As such, triangulation of the data for this inquiry required multiple
235 data from unrelated sources (Berg & Lune, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Data were drawn
236 from the postgraduate works of Flath (1963), Hoover (1958), and Land (1977); yearbooks and
237 conference proceedings from the NCAA archives (years from 1951-1986); and various other
238 accounts of the NCAA's history such as Dunnivant (2004), Rudolph (1962), Byers (1995),
239 Shulman and Bowen (2011), and Smith (1988). In total, we consulted more than 7000 pages that
240 documented the evolution of the NCAA's rise to power and maintenance of its dominance (see
241 Appendix A). Given that this research spanned a period of more than 100 years, pragmatism
242 dictated focusing on key moments of struggle in the field of collegiate sports that challenged the
243 primacy of the NCAA as an institution. Theorized as "seeds of change," we began by examining
244 the early years of the NCAA and its work to establish legitimacy, struggles of managing
245 television broadcasts, implementation of Title IX, and continuous debates of amateurism. The
246 data snowballed to include the consequences of organizational actions (e.g. the NCAA's
247 restructuring in the 1970s that was a result of struggles between small and large schools).
248 Although historical accounts may never be fully reconciled, we are confident that the diverse and
249 abundant sources consulted yielded accurate, theoretically sound insights into the NCAA's work
250 to maintain dominance in college and amateur athletics.

251 **4.2 Data analysis**

252 Data analysis for this study entailed an inductive grounded theory-building approach
253 (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). The analytic process commenced
254 following the recommendations and examples provided by Langley (1999) and Zietsma and

255 Lawrence (2010). By engaging in the process of abduction (see Timmermans & Tavory, 2012),
256 we were able develop new theoretical insights within known theoretical traditions (Gehman et
257 al., 2017). Following the recommendations of Gioia et al (2012), data coding commenced with
258 the identifying of first order concepts. During the coding process, we met regularly to discuss the
259 emergent constructs and to refine the analytic process. Data were continually scrutinized to
260 ensure a comprehensive compilation of concepts. While identifying first order constructs, we
261 simultaneously theorized relationships among concepts to establish second order themes. Like
262 most qualitative research, this process was recursive, wherein coding and relationships were
263 continually adjusted and revisited until a final data structure was identified. For example, the first
264 order concepts “rivalry between NCAA and NAIA” and “NCAA and AIAW vie for control of
265 women’s sport” comprised the second order theme of “size and identity of membership.” Given
266 the substantial history covered in this study, it is not surprising that overlapping ideas required
267 attention and extensive theorizing. These instances were debated among the researchers and were
268 often discussed with colleagues to confirm the team’s analysis. Ultimately, four aggregate
269 theoretical dimensions emerged from the second order themes that provided insight into how the
270 NCAA has been able to avoid institutional upheaval despite embedded elements of destruction
271 (see Figure 1).

272 [insert Figure 1 approximately here]

273 Given the challenges of bias with historical research and issues of theoretical
274 applicability due to contextual specificity, various strategies were employed to address
275 trustworthiness and transferability. First, thick description of the research context and positions
276 of actors within the context was provided so that readers could locate roles and constructs in
277 similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, the findings and constructs of this research

278 were discussed with people who were familiar with both the context and theoretical framework
279 of this study. These disinterested individuals provided insight into data interpretations and
280 challenged the researchers' theoretical assumptions. Additionally, scholars with expertise in
281 other sport institutions were consulted regarding the applicability of the findings. Doing so often
282 resulted in us refining and further theorizing the data. As such, we are confident in the rigor,
283 transferability, and credibility of the findings beyond this study's specific context.

284 **5. Findings**

285 As outlined in previous sections, the emergence of the NCAA as the dominant institution
286 in the field of intercollegiate athletics occurred through vociferous contestations from numerous
287 entities. Here, we present a chronology of the institutionalization and persistence of the NCAA.
288 In the following subsections, we discuss how the aggregate dimensions from our data evolved
289 over time. We recognized three broad time frames within which the NCAA worked to establish
290 and maintain dominance in the field. The first time frame encompassed the actions from the
291 inception of the NCAA in 1905 until 1942. It was during this period that the NCAA grew from
292 its initial 38 member schools to 314 schools in 1942 and included "nearly every college or
293 university of importance in the country" (Stagg, 1946, p. 81). The second time frame was 1942
294 to 1973. It was during this period that the NCAA dealt with issues, such as expansion of
295 membership to small universities, the impacts of the Sanity Codes, and the rise of televised
296 football, that would lead to the major restructuring of the NCAA's governance structure in 1973.
297 The final time period was from 1973 until 2011. The modern challenges to the NCAA have been
298 most legal contestations that have resulted in certain changes such as loosening of governance
299 restrictions. Indeed, the NCAA's modern strategies of managing contestations reflect the
300 struggles of the past by allowing the NCAA to know which battles to fight and which ones to

301 ignore. As such, we provide insight into how some institutions survive when others succumb to
302 destruction by suggesting that governance associations like the NCAA learn to control the
303 boundaries, practices, and cognitions of institutions.

304 **5.1 1905-1942: Instated to institutionalized**

305 The NCAA's rise to power was characterized by tempestuous development within both
306 the intercollegiate athletics and amateur sport in the U.S., which presented challenges to
307 coalescing the field of intercollegiate athletics. In its early years the NCAA struggled to establish
308 legitimacy while simultaneously creating and defending its boundaries of authority. College and
309 university officials were conflicted by the contradictory logics of the commercial appeal and the
310 educational identity of athletics (Chu, 1989). The general public and the U.S. government were
311 questioning the existence of college football given the game's brutality. External organizations,
312 like the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), were vying for dominance in amateur athletics and
313 would continually seek to undermine and delegitimize the NCAA. Even after the NCAA's
314 dominance in intercollegiate athletics had become institutionalized by the 1940s, the head of the
315 United States Olympic Association was quoted in the *New York Times* suggesting, "college
316 athletes who receive scholarships because of their ability in sports become, in fact,
317 professionals" (New York Times, Dec 12, 1949). The early legitimacy struggles were
318 complicated by the fact that many of these battles were highly publicized, sometimes becoming
319 issues that required intervention from Congress and other arms of the federal government.

320 Perhaps the most notable and public contestations occurred with the AAU. In the early
321 years of the NCAA, AAU was the foremost amateur athletic organization in the country. The
322 AAU, whose stated aim was control of all amateur athletics (Flath, 1963), governed lacrosse,
323 track and field, and basketball (Stagg, 1946). Affiliated with international amateur athletics and

324 the Olympic Movement, the AAU attempted to invoke rules regulating amateur eligibility by
325 mandating the teams or schools with which its members could compete. Garnering an
326 endorsement from the International Olympic Committee recognizing it as the U.S.
327 representative, the AAU was a source of significant tension as it worked to undermine
328 amateurism within intercollegiate athletics. Although the AAU's initial eligibility rules were
329 aimed to quell amateurs from competing against professionals, these rules became tools in the
330 organization's fight against the NCAA. The AAU and its affiliates generally controlled the U.S.
331 Olympic organization, yet the NCAA had the highest numbers of amateur athletes on the US
332 Olympics teams. In addition, NCAA athletes, won more Olympic medals than athletes from the
333 AAU or any other organization U.S. amateur sport organization. Despite the AAU's attempts to
334 delegitimize the NCAA, the NCAA's legitimacy was strengthened by the success of its athletes.

335 Whereas stakeholders of intercollegiate athletics seemed to have divergent interests, there
336 seemed to be an implicit consensus that college sports should be played by amateurs (using
337 definitions similar to those of the AAU). The subscription to rules of amateurism in
338 intercollegiate athletics should have meant that the NCAA should have been subjected to AAU
339 rules. However, the NCAA and its members objected to this and set to establish their own rules
340 (Flath, 1963). Of its initial charges, perhaps the most difficult task for the NCAA was building
341 an association that could accommodate the interests of various constituencies while also adhering
342 to amateur values. Prior to the NCAA, intercollegiate athletics had gone from periods of student
343 organizing to tenuous partnerships between schools to disjointed conferences with differing rules
344 (Rudolph, 1962). As the association sought to expand its membership, the NCAA began to
345 codify rules that governed all aspects of intercollegiate athletics, including rules of gameplay,
346 membership, and organizational structure. The organization created various rules committees

347 that worked to create a semblance of order within the field. With these committees, the NCAA
348 had established legislative and judicial entities for managing member grievances (Falla 1981),
349 thereby fostering stability within the field that had been foreign to not only intercollegiate but
350 also amateur athletics before the emergence of the NCAA.

351 The NCAA's expansive governance was outpaced by the growing popularity and
352 commercialization of the field (Smith, 2000). As the popularity of college athletics grew, the
353 NCAA continued to face questions of legitimacy, especially in regards to amateurism. The
354 increasing revenues and desires to win football games led to corrupt recruiting practices of
355 athletes. In 1929, the Carnegie Foundation released a scathing report condemning these
356 practices. However, this report gained minimal traction with the public and resulted in only
357 minor rules changes from the NCAA. The reaction to the report was described as follows:

358 The Carnegie Foundation's indictment of schools that subsidized athletes received front
359 page attention wherever big-time football was played, but it appeared on a Thursday
360 (October, 24), followed by the local university's denial or a shrug of indifference, after
361 which the newspapers refocused their attention on what really mattered—how the local
362 home team would fare in Saturday's game. (Oriad, 2012, p. 8).

363 Although this report was seemingly ignored, it had brought to light issues that would be
364 exacerbated as more universities sought to add athletics programs to tap into the well of athletic
365 revenues. The recruiting excesses continued and the increasing public interest had also resulted
366 in a rise of gambling on college football (Smith, 2000). As college football became increasingly
367 popular, the NCAA had new issues to address that would test its ability to control the institution
368 it had created.

369 From the time of its initial commissioning to 1942 when it was noted that the NCAA was
370 indeed dominant within the field (see Stagg, 1946), the NCAA's evolution entailed three
371 encompassing and overlapping activities. First, the NCAA strategically worked to establish itself
372 as the primary, legitimate governor of intercollegiate athletics and delegitimize the other
373 organizations that vied for control in the field. The NCAA established institutional boundaries
374 while creating the meaning of what entailed both collegiate and amateur sport in the U.S. A key
375 function of these efforts was also the work of instituting practices that would rally support from
376 key actors in the field. Similar to previous findings, this practice work complemented the
377 boundary work of the NCAA (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Whereas this created inevitable
378 tensions with external amateur organizations (i.e. AAU), the subsequent battles of supremacy
379 strengthened the NCAA by forcing the organization to solidify its governance in the field. As the
380 NCAA cemented its external legitimacy through superior practice and outputs (i.e. college
381 athletes' success in the Olympics), external organizations that attempted to control intercollegiate
382 sport were diminished to playing fringe roles. The manner in which the NCAA controlled
383 practices, boundaries, and cognitions evolved as its governance and the field matured.

384 **5.2 1942-1973: Regulation to restructuring**

385 As consumption of games became more tenable with the advent of television, the NCAA
386 was experiencing a new legitimacy issues created by the uncovering of questionable recruiting
387 tactics. In 1948, the NCAA sought to address recruiting issues by enacting the "Sanity Codes."
388 These were sweeping rules that expanded the NCAA's authority to enforce punishments for
389 inappropriate behavior from its membership. However, the Sanity Codes were eventually
390 repealed in 1952 due to the rigidity of the punishments (the only punishment was expulsion) and
391 later replaced with rules that allowed for more reflexivity (Smith, 2000). Despite its initial failure

392 with the Sanity Codes, the NCAA had laid the framework of its ability to regulate inappropriate
393 behavior, which ultimately strengthened the legitimacy of its governance.

394 In addition to creating mechanisms for sanctioning, the NCAA sought to expand its
395 boundaries to encompass all of intercollegiate athletics. Yet, the NCAA was again faced with
396 vanquishing another competing organization, the National Association of Intercollegiate
397 Athletics (NAIA). The NAIA was founded in 1938 as the organization for marginalized
398 universities that had been excluded from both NCAA and AAU tournaments, particularly
399 basketball tournaments (Hoover, 1958; Land, 1977). The NAIA's membership was composed of
400 liberal arts colleges, teachers' colleges, and historically Black colleges that had traditionally been
401 ignored by the NCAA (Hoover, 1958). As the NAIA began to grow and attract media attention,
402 it presented a legitimate threat to the NCAA given its large membership and on-court successes.
403 By 1955, the NAIA's membership had ballooned to 435 members (just four fewer members than
404 the NCAA) and had one of its members represent the U.S. in the Pan-American Games (Hoover,
405 1958).

406 To address the small college concerns, the NCAA organized a small college committee in
407 the late 1930s and instituted a college division in 1952 that was designed to accommodate the
408 interests of the previously marginalized colleges and universities (Falla, 1981). The NCAA made
409 this division attractive by creating small college post-season tournaments that offered national
410 championships for the members of this division. Further, the NCAA created different levels of
411 membership wherein some small colleges could be affiliated with the association while paying
412 minimal dues (Falla, 1981; Stagg, 1946). Then by the 1960s, the NCAA began to accept
413 memberships from and allowed historically Black colleges to compete in sponsored events.
414 These strategic actions had begun the process of making the NCAA an attractive association for

415 the less prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S., thereby resulting in the growth of the
416 NCAA and marginalization of the NAIA.

417 As the NCAA was working to expand the scope of its control, a new technology
418 threatened to topple the entire sport industry. The advent of television and televised broadcasts
419 presented significant challenges for the NCAA. This emerging technology necessitated action
420 from the NCAA given that the unregulated broadcasting of football games was negatively
421 impacting gate receipts for universities. As noted in the 1951 NCAA yearbook,

422 The concern of the colleges of the country with the effects of television upon football
423 attendance and thus upon the future of intercollegiate and intramural athletic and physical
424 training programs became more and more evident as sets began to saturate important
425 collegiate areas...One important conference, the Big Ten, went so far as to ban live
426 television during the 1950 season and other conferences have followed suit.

427 In 1952, a television committee was commissioned to develop a plan for managing
428 televised broadcasts of football games that would not only prevent extensive revenue losses but
429 would also monetize the broadcasts for the association. This committee, working in conjunction
430 with data from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), developed an encompassing plan
431 of rules that were designed to limit the adverse effects of television. By 1960, the NCAA
432 membership had settled upon a revised proposal that allowed the NCAA to negotiate all
433 television contracts and limit the number of broadcasts per school. By 1973, the NCAA's
434 television contracts had reached \$6.75 million per year and had resulted in the cancellation of the
435 NAIA's most lucrative television contracts.

436 Though television would ultimately prove to be an abundant source of revenue for the
437 NCAA and its members, this new technology also exacerbated issues between the smaller

438 colleges and the larger universities. The most influential universities, which had shifted from the
439 elite academic institutions of the northeast to major football universities in Southern and
440 Midwestern geographic regions of the U.S., believed that their revenue earning potential was
441 being stifled by the NCAA's limitations placed upon television broadcasts. The non-elites were
442 primarily concerned with the financial strains of trying to compete with the larger universities.
443 These divergent concerns presented a significant challenge to the NCAA, as satiating the
444 concerns of all its constituents was seemingly unfeasible. Concerns regarding the scope of
445 NCAA governance authority resulted in conflicts with high status stakeholders. In an
446 unprecedented move, the NCAA called its 1st Special Convention in 1973 wherein the NCAA
447 restructured into three separate divisions that would be more reflexive to the diverse needs of its
448 growing membership. Colleges and universities were able to align themselves with other
449 members that operated within similar constraints and had similar interests while also being able
450 to compete in postseason competitions for championships in their respective divisions. Under
451 this new structuration, members of each division were allowed to establish criteria for
452 membership and bylaws for governance. This measure eased internal conflicts among the
453 membership as small school interests were still protected while the larger elite universities were
454 unburdened and allowed to pursue their own interests.

455 Further, it was during this time period of restructuring that the NCAA gained supremacy
456 over the NAIA. Prior to 1974, colleges were permitted dual membership with the NCAA and
457 NAIA, which allowed them to choose which postseason tournament they would attend (Land,
458 1977). This adversely affected the NAIA, as the best teams in its membership were needed for its
459 tournaments if it hoped to draw media attention and generate revenue. Given the higher status of
460 the universities affiliated with the NCAA, the declarations of fringe universities did not impact

461 the sustainability of its postseason competitions. In what turned out as a strategic blunder in
462 1974, the NAIA began requiring its members to declare prior to the start of the athletic seasons
463 within which post season tournaments they would participate (those of the NAIA or NCAA).
464 This rule change resulted in many NAIA schools defecting to join the NCAA. Although the
465 NAIA remained operational, it was no longer a threat to the NCAA's dominance as the
466 organization's membership had been substantially reduced.

467 The NCAA's institutional work during this time period reflected the maturation of both
468 its governance and the field. The NCAA was no longer forced to justify its existence within the
469 broad field of amateur athletics and was tasked with solidifying its governance of intercollegiate
470 athletics. It strategically worked to expand its boundaries to include lower status colleges. It
471 developed means for enforcing regulations. Finally, the NCAA was forced to manage a
472 substantial regulatory crisis with the invention of television. The NCAA had become dominant to
473 the point that contending organizations such as the NAIA and AAU were no longer threats.
474 However, as detailed subsequently, the primary challenges emerged from diverse internal
475 interests (see Seo & Creed, 2002).

476 **5.3 1973-2011: Crises of control and new legitimacy concerns**

477 Much of the first half of the 20th century had been dedicated to solidifying the legitimacy
478 and scope of NCAA regulatory influence. By the 1970s, the NCAA had reached maturation as
479 the dominant institution in the field of intercollegiate athletics and had established itself as the
480 primary purveyor of amateur athletics in the U.S. The NCAA had successfully vanquished
481 competing organizations and had created a reflexive structure for managing issues among its
482 membership. With its legitimacy cemented and no real competition, the NCAA's strategies for
483 addressing challenges evolved and the organization became emboldened. The 1970s-1980s

484 presented issues that showcased this evolution, as new legislation, an economic downturn in the
485 U.S., and internal litigations tested the NCAA's governance. The NCAA employed differing
486 strategies for addressing new challenges depending on the perceived legitimacy of the threat.
487 Broadly, legitimate challenges, meaning those originating from powerful internal or legislative
488 entities, would be addressed (Nite, 2017). Conversely, issues originating from illegitimate
489 sources were ignored or minimally acknowledged, as the potential for institutional damage was
490 minimal.

491 The NCAA's restructuring in 1973 had gone a long way toward addressing conflicts
492 between the large and smaller members. However, the ire of the membership shifted to the
493 NCAA's policies as the larger elite universities vied for further loosening of television broadcast
494 negotiation restrictions. These universities sought flexibility to negotiate individualized
495 broadcast contracts, a move that would require the NCAA to relinquish its sole-control of these
496 negotiations. Given the dearth of viable competing organizations, the NCAA adopted the brazen
497 approach of ardent defense of its rules, even against legitimate internal stakeholders. Despite
498 dissention from its larger members, the NCAA refused to relinquish its control of broadcast
499 negotiations. By the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, the NCAA would be mired in litigation
500 with the University of Oklahoma and the University of Georgia, two large stakeholders in the
501 field, wherein these universities took their fight with the NCAA to the courts (*NCAA v. Board of*
502 *Regents*). Ultimately, the courts ruled that the NCAA's rules violated anti-trust agreements and
503 the organization was forced to adjust its rules accordingly. Individual universities and
504 conferences were allowed to negotiate their own television contracts but the NCAA remained in
505 control of negotiations for broadcasting rights for championship events. These court cases
506 ultimately resulted in the NCAA relinquishing control of the financial aspects of football bowl

507 games. However, it preserved its control over which schools could play in bowl games, the
508 number of practices, and athlete eligibility. Despite the contemptuous litigation and loss of
509 revenue control, the NCAA retained the majority of its regulatory powers in sports other than
510 football.

511 The 1970s also provided another challenge for the NCAA and its membership: the
512 passage of Title IX. Passed in 1972, Title IX of the Educational Amendments decreed that
513 educational entities receiving federal funding were prohibited from discriminating on the basis of
514 sex. The law had profound effects in athletics as essentially all levels of schools, including
515 colleges and universities, were legally mandated to provide women and girls with opportunities
516 comparable to their male counterparts to participate in athletics (Staurowsky, 2003). As reflected
517 in the numerous roundtables of the mid-1970s NCAA conventions, NCAA member
518 representatives expressed consternation regarding the implementation of the new legislation. The
519 fear was that the inclusion of women's sports would financially cripple many schools, requiring
520 them to abandon intercollegiate athletic competition altogether or drastically reduce the number
521 of sports universities would sponsor (Staurowsky, 2003).

522 The NCAA's initial responses to Title IX reflected its maturity. Similar to the internal
523 issues of television contracts, the NCAA avoided making substantial changes and protested the
524 implementation of the new federal statute. Specifically, the NCAA passed resolution No. 133
525 that included the following wording, "[the NCAA] shall oppose any [Department of Health,
526 Education and Welfare] standard or administrative enforcement method which would require the
527 [Department of Health, Education and Welfare] to monitor and dictate in detail the financial
528 operations of the nation's colleges and universities with respect to athletics." Secondly, the
529 NCAA lobbied for support from powerful allies with former NCAA president John Fuzak

530 soliciting the support of President Gerald Ford in opposition to Title IX. In his letter, he claimed
531 that the Title IX could potentially destroy big-time men's intercollegiate athletics (Staurowsky,
532 2003). The NCAA and its membership avoided substantial changes until a series of lawsuits that
533 had reached the U.S. Supreme Court forced the NCAA and its membership into Title IX
534 compliance. At this point, the NCAA absorbed the fledgling organization, the Association for
535 Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), and brought women's athletics under its
536 governance structure. Whereas some had feared that Title IX would topple the field, the NCAA
537 and intercollegiate athletics were cemented in American lore and continued with minimal
538 interruption.

539 In addition to Title IX, the NCAA was forced to defend its dominance in amateur sport
540 when the United States Senate Commerce Committee drafted a proposed bill in 1973 that would
541 have put the federal government in control of at least 30 amateur sports. This bill was introduced
542 in response to Congress's increased frustrations of U.S. Olympic performances and the issues
543 between the NCAA and AAU. In fact, the NCAA had formally withdrawn from the United
544 States Olympic Committee (USOC) amidst concerns of the organization's structural issues
545 (Nafziger, 1983). Although the bill eventually passed as The Amateur Sports Act of 1978,
546 substantial opposition from the NCAA resulted in the NCAA maintaining control over
547 intercollegiate sport. The NCAA rejoined the USOC through a series of negotiations and
548 compromises wherein the USOC agreed to numerous changes specified by the NCAA. As noted
549 in the 1978 volume of the NCAA news:

550 The NCAA's withdrawal, along with the discontent expressed by many closely
551 associated with the Olympic effort, led to the formation of the President's Commission

552 on Olympic Sports. Many of the recommendations from the [President's Commission on
553 Olympic Sports] were incorporated into the USOC's reorganization. (p. 7)

554 The NCAA's influence and legitimacy were bolstered through this process as its defense of its
555 power resulted in a victory over a federal agency.

556 Finally, the NCAA's evolution is seen in its responses, or lack thereof, to illegitimate
557 challengers. Noticeably, the NCAA had learned to turn a deaf ear to the yammering of external
558 organizations that would periodically protest the NCAA's practices and governance. In the
559 tradition of the Carnegie Foundation reports, organization such as the Knight Commission on
560 Intercollegiate Athletics and the Drake Group have issued several reports and op-eds criticizing
561 the NCAA and calling for reform in intercollegiate athletics. Whereas the earlier Carnegie
562 Foundation report had received moderate attention and resulted in some alterations to NCAA
563 policies, these later renditions were met with minimal response. The NCAA and its membership
564 have recognized that these types of contestations posed minimal threat as they originated from
565 entities that had no authority within the field. Consider the following excerpt from an open letter
566 penned by the Director of Athletics at Virginia Commonwealth University wherein he dismissed
567 the significance of the findings of a recent report from the Knight Commission that criticized
568 excessive spending:

569 The article, which ran initially without any input from VCU athletics, focused on an
570 increase in Athletics spending from 2005-2011...From the beginning of my tenure last
571 year we developed and implemented a strategic plan that in part focused on fiscal
572 responsibility and improving the experience of our student-athletes. It is my belief that
573 the facts show that this focus has paid dividend...VCU Athletics is winning while

574 spending efficiently. (see <http://forums.vcuramnation.com/threads/response-to-the->
575 [knight-commission-report.12559/](http://forums.vcuramnation.com/threads/response-to-the-knight-commission-report.12559/))

576 After more than a century of challenges, the NCAA and its members had learned to ignore
577 illegitimate challengers. In the rare instances wherein challenges from non-core stakeholders
578 would result in litigation, the NCAA would revert to the method of defending its practices and
579 only adjusting when forced to do so.

580 As the field and its governance matured, much of the NCAA's maintenance work
581 entailed creating and adjusting rules of practice while making the internal structuration more
582 responsive to members. This responsiveness, coupled with strengthened boundaries and
583 legitimate institutional cognitions, allowed the NCAA to respond to potential damage from
584 internal contestations. This evolution can be noted in the NCAA's easing of restrictions
585 regarding food allotments and scholarship structures for athletes. Further, the NCAA learned that
586 contentions from challengers outside of the boundaries of the field often did not warrant
587 responses. In the beginning, the NCAA had heated struggles with external organizations (e.g.
588 YMCA, AAU) over who would dominate amateur sport in the U.S. As the NCAA evolved, it
589 learned to coexist with these and similar organizations by focusing on internal issues. In this
590 regard, it has avoided the creation of unneeded tensions, having established legitimacy and
591 solidified its boundaries to the extent that rogue challengers (e.g. media pundits and watch dog
592 organizations such as the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics) can be ignored. The
593 NCAA has relied primarily on discursive framing strategies to combat legitimate external
594 challenges (Nite, 2017). As such, the NCAA evolved its defense strategies over the years to
595 reflect its dominance within the field that it first created and now is tasked with maintaining.
596 This evolution is depicted in Figure 2.

597 [insert Figure 2 approximately here]

598 **6. Discussion**

599 Given the number of indicators of institutional change, the case of the NCAA is
600 theoretically intriguing as it offers an exemplary illustration of institutional maintenance work as
601 the NCAA has remained dominant despite elements predicting change. Starting from concerns
602 over the violence in football, 62 universities were invited to a meeting. Out of this meeting, the
603 NCAA was created and 110 years later, the NCAA has grown to 1281 member schools (the
604 NAIA as the second largest governing institution in college sports has 250 members), governing
605 460,000 athletes and hosting 89 championships. In addition, more than 1000 of its athletes
606 represented 107 countries participated in the 2016 Olympic Games. Overcoming conflicts with
607 the AAU, YMCA, Olympic Committee, federal legislation of Title IX, and internal conflicts
608 with and among its member colleges, the NCAA represents a counter-narrative to theories of
609 institutional change as it has resisted the seeds of change and survived. There is much that can be
610 learned from the NCAA that informs both extant theory and practice beyond the context of this
611 study.

612 **6.1. Theoretical contributions**

613 We sought to understand of how a dominant sport institution endured despite elements
614 that would predict institutional upheaval. The primary strength of our study is that it provides an
615 account of how institutional work that spans the progression of a field from fractured infancy to
616 matured dominance. In this regard, we were able to draw from the life course of the institution to
617 understand the actions and consequences of those actions to provide answers to our research
618 questions (see Scott, 1995). We offer numerous extensions to the burgeoning institutional work
619 literature within sport management (see Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2015;

620 Nite, 2017; Nite & Washington, 2017; Woolf et al., 2016). Notably, we provide nuanced detail to
621 Dowling and Smith's (2016) research, which outlined the importance of institutional work for
622 creating and maintaining sport institutions. Specifically, we move beyond recognizing that
623 institutional work occurs and detail the evolving nature of institutional work in congruence with
624 the maturation of a field (see Figure 3).

625 [insert Figure 3 approximately here]

626 Emerging fields generally exhibit fewer controlling mechanisms and less engrained
627 practices (Hardy & Maguire, 2017). Similar to previous research (see Battilana et al., 2009;
628 Currie, Lockett, Fin, Martin, & Waring, 2012; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), we found that
629 institutional entrepreneurs (in our case the NCAA) endeavor to bring order to the field by
630 establishing legitimate institutional structures (i.e. boundaries, practices, and cognitions) to
631 address various internal and external tensions (see Figure 3). For example, the NCAA had to
632 define what it meant to participate in intercollegiate athletic competition while simultaneously
633 negotiating the rules of competition, thereby developing the cognitive structures and boundaries
634 of the institution. We argue that similar processes can be noticed in other sport and non-sport
635 contexts. Consider the sport of rugby which currently operates with three different codes of
636 competition (i.e. Rugby Union, Rugby League, and Ruby 7s). Actors within each code have
637 undergone processes similar to the NCAA. Rugby entities have worked delineate the boundaries,
638 create practices, and develop cognitions that create institutional structures that would allow them
639 to become dominant within the sport of rugby. When Ruby League split from Rugby Union,
640 Rugby League advocates had to create unique and agreed upon practices, establish delineating
641 boundaries, and develop cognitive structures, all of which were important for considering Rugby
642 League as a legitimate institution (Collins, 1998). Thus, we theorize that in emerging sport fields,

643 institutional work entails the simultaneous creation of legitimate boundaries, practices, and
644 cognitions.

645 Through our analysis, we recognized outcomes that counter current understandings of
646 institutional change and stability. Early tensions, both internal and external, had profound effects
647 on institutional boundaries and cognitions. Previous scholars have highlighted that conflicts and
648 tensions among institutional members and from external challengers can be potentially
649 destabilizing to institutional structures (see Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Nite, 2017; Welty
650 Peachey & Bruening, 2011). However, we found that institutional structures may actually be
651 strengthened through tension and conflict. Especially in the earliest stages of field maturation,
652 we contend that internal issues among institutional members requires flexibility among member
653 interests. We found that as the field of intercollegiate athletics continued to evolve, the NCAA's
654 flexibility to adjust to member interests allowed it to remain dominant. When the NCAA
655 attempted rigidity with its regulation of television, it suffered irreparable damage (Nite &
656 Washington, 2017). Institutions that have adapted their structures and regulations in a flexible
657 manner may actually be more enduring as flexibility gives space for multiple interests to exist
658 without destabilizing (see also O'Brien & Slack, 2003). Lok and De Rond (2013) recognized this
659 in their account of the Cambridge University Boat Club. The IOC adopted a similar approach in
660 allowing professional athletes to compete at the Olympic Games. The IOC had resisted the
661 inclusion of professional athletes across all sports for years. Some argued that this allowance was
662 made to increase television audiences which would be integral to maintaining the popularity of
663 the Olympics (Greene, 2012). In this regard, the IOC became flexible in its practices to
664 strengthen its institutional structures. Thus, we add nuance to Seo and Creed's (2002)
665 theorization that competing interests create opportunities of change. We propose that flexible

666 institutional structures born of internal contestations would be positively related to institutional
667 stability in sport contexts.

668 We found that external tensions impacted institutional boundaries, practices, and
669 cognitions in somewhat different manners. First, we noticed that external challenges provided
670 impetus for the NCAA to strengthen its practices and solidify its cognitions. In this regard, the
671 membership of the NCAA united in the bolstering of these structures. Similar processes occurred
672 in Micelotta and Washington's (2013) study of Italian professionals who united to rebuff
673 government interference. Sport player associations may also provide a relevant example of the
674 utility of our findings. The Major League Baseball Player Association, a powerful union of
675 professional baseball players in the U.S. which one could argue has become an institution, used
676 the external threat from Major League Baseball's collective ownership as a means for solidifying
677 their dominance in governance issues. Specifically, the league's ownership endeavored to alter
678 the labor environment by instituting a salary cap for player salaries. The player's union united to
679 resist this external threat and coalesced around agreed upon practices for fair labor standards,
680 ultimately leading the cancellation of the Major League Baseball World Series in 1994. To this
681 day, Major League Baseball labor standards are dominated by the player's union (Lowenfish,
682 2010). Therefore, we propose that external contestations and tensions would be positively related
683 to strengthened institutional practices and cognitions.

684 We noticed that external contestations and tensions had different impacts on institutional
685 boundaries. We contribute to the existing arguments around boundary and practice work
686 regarding boundary permeability. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) showed that permeable
687 boundaries allowed for innovation and combatted the alienation of marginalized stakeholders.
688 We recognized two different types of external challengers: those operating in similar fields (i.e.

689 universities and colleges with membership in other associations) and those seeking to influence
690 the field (i.e. watchdog organizations, media pundits). The NCAA's boundary work differed with
691 both groups. For those operating within the same space (i.e. college and university athletics), the
692 NCAA maintained an open view of membership and expanded its boundaries of influence. The
693 act of expansion solidified the NCAA's dominance and diminished the capacity of competitors.
694 The boundary expansion of the NCAA seemed to mirror those of other dominant sport entities.
695 For example, others have documented the expansion of FIFA and have shown similarities in the
696 approach to expansion (see Sugden & Tomlinson, 1998). The notion of expansion challenges
697 existing research that has suggested restricting access from outsiders serves to maintain
698 institutional arrangements (Siebert, Wilson & Hamilton, 2017; Woolf, Berg, Newland, & Green,
699 2016). In their examination of a mixed martial arts gym, Woolf and colleagues (2016) outlined
700 how creating entry barriers helped control membership and maintained institutional
701 arrangements. Instead, we propose that open membership boundaries for those operating within
702 similar institutional spaces would be positively related to institutional maintenance and control.

703 Regarding external challengers who seek to influence the field, the NCAA evolved its
704 understanding of how to address contestations. During its infancy, the NCAA was forced to
705 address external challenges by developing legitimate practices and cognitions. As it matured and
706 became institutionalized, the NCAA evolved its responses to reflect its established legitimacy.
707 The NCAA no longer had to adapt to external threats beyond the realm of its influence. It has
708 learned to coexist with entities competing in similar realms (e.g. YMCA, AAU) as they no
709 longer posed threats to the NCAA's dominance. Other externalities such as media pundits and
710 watchdog organizations are generally addressed through benign defense measures such as
711 discursive framing (Nite, 2017). Finally, we should note that legitimate threats, those being

712 challenges that have potential to drastically alter institutional arrangements (Clemens & Cook,
713 2009), still necessitated action. We noted that shifting attitudes toward player safety concerns
714 were addressed by changing practices (see also Heinze & Lu, 2017). It is likely that institutions
715 learn to recognize which threats necessitate changes and which ones may be addressed through
716 defensive techniques such as framing. Thus, we contend that as institutional fields evolve from
717 infancy to maturation, institutional actors' understanding of threats and defense strategies reflect
718 congruent evolution.

719 Finally, we contribute to understandings of institutional work and institutional
720 complexity. Considering the growing research in pluralism and institutional complexity
721 suggesting that there are multiple institutions and logics competing for dominance in a field
722 (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Pache & Santos, 2010), it is important for
723 institutional entrepreneurs to theorize which institutional arrangements require attention. The
724 NCAA is a classic case of institutional complexity wherein it must balance interests based in
725 multiple, often competing, logics (see also Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013; Southall et al.,
726 2008; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). We suggest that learning to strategically adapt
727 boundaries, practices, and institutional cognitions may be key to maintaining institutional
728 dominance in these scenarios. This extends previous notions that have suggested that
729 maintenance is achieved by deference to actions rooted in dominant logics (Nite et al., 2013).
730 Our findings are similar to Skirstad and Chelladurai (2011), who showed that soccer clubs could
731 be structured to accommodate multiple logics. Further, O'Brien and Slack (2003) detailed the
732 process of adopting professional logics within English Rugby Union. Although
733 professionalization was counter to its traditions, English Rugby Union incorporated professional
734 practices to maintain legitimacy and dominance in the field. Indeed, O'Brien and Slack (2003)

735 noted, “effective leaders must develop the capability to anticipate cognitive shifts in their
736 environment” (p. 444). As such, we propose that institutional maintenance is positively related
737 institutional adaptability in instances of institutional complexity.

738 **6.2. Practical implications**

739 Although the specifics of our research may be contextually bound, we contend that
740 concepts discussed here have practical utility for other sport entities seeking to preserve
741 authority, address conflicts, and maintain institutional structures. First, we emphasize the
742 importance of remaining flexible inside institutional boundaries. We found that flexibility of
743 practices had become a source of strength for the NCAA as it allowed for multiple interests
744 within the institution to coexist and evolve with changes in the field. Indeed, plasticity of
745 practices may be particularly for relevant for league executives dealing with issues such as
746 playoff formatting, regulation of gambling, managing player interests, and even approaches to
747 integrating technological advances. For instance, the National Basketball Association (NBA) has
748 reportedly discussed changing its playoff structure to address concerns of league stakeholders and
749 fans (Axson, 2018). NBA Commissioner, Adam Silver, has voiced support for legal sport
750 gambling in order to align the league with fan interests (Purdum, 2017). As such, the NBA has
751 seemingly provided support for our findings that flexibility is important for maintaining
752 institutions. In the case of the NBA, the league is seemingly working to preserve its place as one
753 of the world’s most popular sporting leagues and being able to adjust to changing environments
754 may be key in that endeavor.

755 Our research may also be informative for emerging leagues and fields. Particularly, the
756 eSports phenomenon has evolved within an interesting space that provides challenges to sport
757 practitioners and sport management scholars (see Cunningham et al., 2018; Funk, Pizzo, &

758 Baker, 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). Drawing from our findings, we suggest that practitioners
759 and sport management scholars should theorize field boundaries when considering how to
760 approach eSports. We outlined how expanding boundaries to encompass those competing in
761 similar institutional spaces works to strengthen institutional arrangements. It appears that other
762 sport entities may be adopting similar approaches. For example, Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas
763 Cowboys, became part owner in a gaming company as a sign that he is embracing the potential
764 for eSports as an extension to the Dallas Cowboys brand (Wolf, 2017). Similarly, universities
765 such as the University of North Texas (see Carter, 2017), have started investing in eSports and
766 are considering whether to regulate these programs under current athletic department structures.
767 Thus, we suggest that being open to expanding boundaries may work to strengthen sport
768 institutions.

769 Finally, we highlighted the evolution of the NCAA learning how and, importantly, which
770 battles were important to fight. In this regard, the NCAA seemed to become adept at
771 distinguishing between the types of tensions and challenges that warranted adjustment to its
772 structures and those that required defense tactics absent of change. Effective theorization of
773 issues is especially important given changes within institutional environments. Sport
774 organizations and other governing bodies have been at the visible forefront of important issues
775 such as racial and gender equality, player safety, and corporate social responsibility. For
776 instance, professional athletes in U.S. have engaged in various peaceful forms of demonstration
777 against social injustices. The impact of athlete demonstrations for sport leagues is “complicated”
778 (Ho, 2017) and likely requires effective theorization by league officials regarding effective
779 practices and management of cognitions to address controversial issues.

780 **7. Future research and conclusions**

781 In sum, our research outlined the evolution of a dominant sport association that has
782 become an institution in its own regard. Researchers have noted that “how institutions survive
783 beyond the lifespan of their creators is often seen as remaining in the realm of ‘the mystery’ of
784 institutions” (Siebert et al., 2017, p. 3). We sought to answer our focal question of how a
785 dominant sport association survives despite predictors of change. We found that evolving
786 institutional work of managing practices, boundaries, and cognitions were key to for the
787 NCAA’s dominance. The primary limitation of this study is that it was isolated to one particular
788 setting. We took steps to aid in the transferability of our findings, however, the nuances of our
789 study were contextually bound. Scholars should consider interrogating the viability of our
790 findings and theorizations in other relevant sport settings. Further, our study documented the
791 accounts of the winning governing body. The accounts of those who were adversely impacted by
792 the growth of the NCAA would strengthen our assertions. Scholars should consider questions
793 such as, how do fields evolve due to the presence of dominant sport associations? How do long-
794 lasting, conflict-winning dominant institutions shape entrepreneurial activities in the field?
795 Answers to these questions would offer deeper understanding to how dominant sport governance
796 associations remain in power.
797

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