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### Replicating Inclusivity: The Relationship between Directors' Cup Rankings and LGBTQI+ Inclusive NCAA Athletic Departments

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## Replicating Inclusivity: The Relationship between Directors' Cup Rankings and LGBTQI+ Inclusive NCAA Athletic Departments

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### ABSTRACT

The replication of successful National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic departments is commonly pursued through the targeted hiring of athletic administrators at successful athletic departments. The significance on replicating organizational success through this transfer of people is indicative of the emphases placed on winning and revenue acquisition distinct to collegiate athletic departments. During this transfer, athletic directors inherently infuse transferred organizational practices and logics into the replicating organization. Utilizing Directors' Cup points as a determinant metric of success, this study examined the relationship between success in Division I collegiate athletics and athletic department inclusivity of LGBTQI+ members. Findings illustrated that inclusivity of LGBTQI+ members were a statistically significant predictor of Directors' Cup Scores among NCAA Division I member institutions. Such findings are indicative of the importance in fostering an inclusive organizational environment relative to success in collegiate athletics. Further implications illustrate the positive perpetuation of LGBTQI+ inclusion through the attempted replication of successful collegiate athletic departments.

**Keywords:** College Athletics, Director's Cup, Inclusivity, LGBTQI+, Winning Success



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## INTRODUCTION

Within a given institutional field, similarly situated competitors attempt to replicate the practices, routines, and policies of successful organizations (Kacmar et al., 1999; Pennington, 2021; Tsang & Kwan, 1999; Winter & Szulanski, 2002). Replication is motivated by a desire to “imitate the success of others in the attempt to close gaps or share in gains” (Baden-Fuller & Winter, 2005, p. 3). Accordingly, the process of organizational replication is the direct result of organizational desire to be successful within a specific institutional field (Teece, 1976; Winter, 1995).

The presence of institutional isomorphism among National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions is ubiquitous. Collegiate athletic departments are strikingly similar in their formation, development, and operation (e.g., Cunningham & Ashley, 2001; Nite & Edwards, 2021; Smith & Washington, 2015; Ward, 2015). Such institutional similarity is attributed to the prevalent practice of organization replication (Atwater et al., 2022). Organizational replication in collegiate athletics is executed through the transfer of people, specifically, the targeted hiring of athletic administrators at successful athletic departments (Atwater et al., 2022; Levine, 2015). To this, we often see intercollegiate sport dominated by traditional ideologies in which those in positions of power are White, cisgender, heterosexual men (Springer et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019). Isomorphism through replication in collegiate athletics is “...not surprising, since less successful [athletic] departments and teams likely model their strategies and performance scripts after those of more successful (in terms of wins and losses) programs” (Corr et al., 2020, p. 266). In sum, athletic departments seek to replicate the structures and systems (e.g., logics) of successful athletic departments through the transfer of people.

In sport spaces, replication continues to manifest heteronormative ideologies (Smith & Washington, 2014; Waldron, 2016). Although 12% of college athletes are members of the LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and other identities) community (Turk et al., 2019), institutional policies encourage do not allow this population to live authentically (DeFoor et al., 2018; Mann & Krane, 2019; Satorre & Cunningham, 2019; Turk et al., 2019). Dispute the accumulating evidence that demonstrates the importance of inclusion (Barber & Krane, 2007; Cunningham, 2015; Cunningham & Melton, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2008), inequitable practices, such as replication, continues to reinforce prejudicial behaviors (Herek, 2009).

Success in collegiate athletics is inextricably linked to winning athletic competitions. As organizational replication is inherently about competitive positioning (Teece, 1976; Winter & Szulanski, 2002), institutional athletic stakeholders (e.g., university presidents, board of trustees) seek to hire athletic administrators from athletic departments with winning teams (Kimura, 2018; Read, 2017). Such desire to achieve and maintain success in collegiate athletics is evidenced by the routine transfer of people inter-athletic department and consistent with the prevailing logic pervasive among the NCAA and member institutions that places overt value on athletics success – specifically in profit-sports (i.e., Football, Men’s Basketball) and revenue acquisition (e.g., Corr et al., 2020; Nite et al., 2019; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013).

Recognizing the roles and the intersection of identities (e.g., LGBTQI+, athlete, student), has been shown to contribute to athlete success (Fridley et al., 2023). Additionally, investing in athlete development programming can increase the experiences of college athletes (Stokowski et al., 2020). It is vital that institutions and athletic departments establish, promote, and integrate inclusive practices that increases production and enhance overall satisfaction (Cunningham, 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Shore et al., 2011).

## LEARFIELD Directors' Cup Rankings

The prominent emphasis on winning in collegiate athletics is represented in the prestige of winning the annual National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) LEARFIELD Directors' Cup (Directors' Cup). The Directors' Cup recognizes the most successful (i.e., winningest) athletic department competing in collegiate athletics on an annual basis. Athletic departments are scored on evaluation factors that take into account aggregated seasonal successes in all sponsored sports (e.g., men's, women's, revenue, non-revenue) (NACDA, n.d.). Indicative of the prestige of the Directors' Cup rankings, athletic directors are often rewarded for achieving a certain Directors' Cup ranking. In 2018, for instance, the University of Tennessee awarded then athletic director Phillip Fulmer a \$90,000 bonus for finishing 35th overall in Directors' Cup standings (Athletic Business, 2018). Given evolving compensation structures for administrators, Directors' Cup standings have become a quantifiable metric for determining athletic success (Lattinville & Denny, n.d.). As institutional athletic stakeholders value athletic success (i.e., winning) within the hiring process, Directors' Cup standings and rankings occupy a significant factor in the promotion or hiring of athletic administrators. The prevalence of standard hiring practices (e.g., hiring firms) and the uniform career trajectory of athletic directors perpetuates isomorphism among NCAA member institutions (Cunningham & Ashley, 2001; Smith & Washington, 2013) in which Directors' Cup standings are indicative of success and, subsequently, qualification for promotion (Lawrence et al., 2012; Steinbach, 2006; Stokowski et al., 2020).

## College Sport Inclusivity

The emphasis on winning in collegiate athletics may have implications for promoting inclusivity in athletic departments. As such, it is important to consider the potential benefits of LGBTQI+ inclusive initiatives for institutional athletic stakeholders. Historically, collegiate athletic departments have been male dominated within leadership positions and heteronormative in construction (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Lenskyj, 2012; Mann & Krane, 2018; Newhall & Walker, 2018; Wood et al., 2019). LGBTQI+ members are at increased risk of being rejected, discriminated, and/or harassed in the field of collegiate athletics (Anderson et al., 2019; Anderson, Stokowski et al., 2023; Anderson, Stokowski, & Turk, 2022; Bass et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2014; Murphy, 2012; Turk et al., 2019). Such increased risk manifests in perceived lack of institutional support among LGBTQI+ members (Kosciw et al., 2014) and can include psychological disruptions (e.g., depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation) (Cunningham, 2009; Steck & Perry, 2016). Accordingly, extant literature has established that the traditionally exclusive setting of collegiate athletics has adverse effects on workplace productivity and employee satisfaction (Cunningham, 2015; Kim et al., 2022; Shore et al., 2011).

LGBTQI+ inclusive organizations promote individual self-expression which is positively related to increased psychological outcomes among employees (e.g., *morale*) (Cunningham et al., 2014; Shore et al., 2011). From an organizational standpoint, such outcomes relative to LGBTQI+ initiatives are inherently correlated to efficiency and effectiveness (Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham, 2015; Walker & Melton, 2015). While the NCAA (n.d.) provides a framework to promote inclusion within member athletic departments, organizational and institutional change regarding LGBTQI+ inclusion must be formulated and perpetuated by those in leadership positions (Cunningham, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011). Given the institutional emphasis placed on *winning* in collegiate athletics (e.g., Corr et al., 2020; Nite et al., 2019; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013), athletic administrators may be more inclined to pursue LGBTQI+ inclusive initiatives if such initiatives positively benefit institutional athletic stakeholders themselves.

## METHOD

### Measuring Inclusivity: Athletic Equality Index

Athlete Ally (n.d.) is an organization that champions inclusive excellence among NCAA member institutions. The Athletic Equality Index (AEI) measures LGBTQI+ “inclusion practices and policies in NCAA athletic departments” (Athlete Ally, n.d., para. 2). AEI total scores range from 0 to 100 depending on athletic departments’ performances in eight subareas:

1. Nondiscrimination policy (0 to 25),
2. Transgender inclusion policy (0 to 15),
3. Sexual misconduct policy (0 to 15),
4. Fan codes of conduct (0 to 10),
5. Annual partnership/ collaboration (0 to 15),
6. LGBTQ educational resources (0 to 10),
7. Pro-LGBTQ training for staff (0 to 5),
8. And pro-LGBTQ training for athletes (0 to 5).

Scores were collected from Athlete Ally's official website (Athlete Ally, n.d.). It is worth noting that Athlete Ally calculates AEI scores among NCAA member athletic departments on a continuous basis. Accordingly, an inherent limitation of this study is the calculated AEI scores utilized during data analysis.

### LEARFIELD Directors’ Cup Rankings

Institutional points from the 2021-2022 Directors’ Cup were used as a measure of success among NCAA Division I members. Directors’ Cup points are determined relative to team success (e.g., tournaments, conference championships, bowl games, etc.) (NACDA, n.d.). A total of 295 ( $n = 295$ ) NCAA Division I member institutions were included in statistical analysis. Limitations exist relative to the utilization of Directors’ Cup points as the sole determinant metric of athletics success. While the institutional emphases placed on winning and revenue generation in collegiate athletics lends itself to Directors’ Cup points as a justifiable metric for determining athletics success, a multitude of additional factors contribute and are indicative of athletics success.

### Analysis

A linear regression was conducted to determine if Division I university’s LBGTQIA+ inclusion scores (AEI) are predictive of athletic department success (as measured by Directors’ Cup scores). Additionally, an independent t test was performed to determine if university athletic departments scoring above the median on LBGTQIA+ inclusion (AEI scores) have more success (as measured by Directors’ Cup scores) than those scoring at or below the median. However, it is important to note that a significant amount of positive skewness was found in the dependent variable (Directors’ Cup scores). Skewness values outside the range of -1 to +1 indicate extreme skewness. The skewness value for the Directors’ Cup scores was 1.8. Consequently, a log10 transformation was performed which significantly lowered the amount of skewness (coefficient of skewness = .22). This log10 variable was then used in the regression analysis and independent t test.

## FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are found in Table 1. Results from the linear regression analysis showed that the regression model was statistically significant ( $R^2 = .11$ ,  $F(1, 293) = 37.11$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Thus, AEI scores explained 11% of the variance in Directors' Cup scores. Further, AEI scores were a statistically significant predictor of Directors' Cup Scores ( $B = .006$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Given that the regression coefficient is a product of log10 transformation units, a more practical interpretation is that for every one unit increase in AEI scores, Directors' Cup scores will increase by 6%.

In addition, results from an independent t test showed a statistically significant difference in Directors' Cup points ( $p < .001$ ,  $t(293) = -4.917$ ) between athletic departments scoring above the AEI median compared to those at or below ( $Mdn = 35$ ). On average athletic departments with scores above the AEI median had more Directors' Cup points ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) compared to those scoring at or below the median ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = .44$ ).

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables

Variable	M	SD
Final Points	240.34	287.87
AEI Total	39.17	25.52
AEI Nondiscrimination Policy	17.17	6.86
AEI Trans Inclusion Policy	3.12	5.46
AEI Sexual Harassment Policy	7.90	5.63
AEI Fan Code of Conduct	2.34	4.03
AEI Annual Partnerships/Collaboration	3.41	5.77
AEI LGBTQ Educational Resources	3.24	4.05
AEI Staff Trainings	1.05	2.04
AEI Athlete Trainings	1.03	2.02

**Note:** Final Points are scores from the Learfield Directors' Cup and are in raw score form.

Lastly, among Power-5 conference members, mean scores indicate Power-5 member institutions possess the highest Directors' Cup points and AEI scores. However, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) was an exception to this finding with an AEI score lower than seven conferences outside the Power-5 (see Table 2). Notably, Ivy League member institutions had the highest overall mean AEI score ( $M = 77$ ).

**Table 2.** Comparison of Conferences on AEI Total Scores and Learfield Directors' Cup Final Points

Conference	AEI Scores			Directors' Cup Final Points			Director's Cup Final Points Log Transformation	
	M	N	SD	M	N	SD	M	SD
Missouri Valley	34.17	6	21.545	89.7500	6	35.92597	1.9239	.17568
Mountain West	27.73	11	15.551	153.6591	11	83.76159	2.1235	.26091
Northeast	19.37	8	16.784	68.7500	8	39.56821	1.7592	.29314
OVC	18.75	8	10.607	59.6875	8	45.48857	1.6158	.46072
PAC-12	67.08	12	25.802	709.0417	12	290.17457	2.8117	.20577
Patriot	43.33	9	29.047	95.9444	9	34.84918	1.9550	.16632
SEC	42.14	14	21.636	768.4643	14	264.58291	2.8536	.18743
SoConn	20.71	7	9.322	85.4286	7	41.03700	1.8773	.25358
Southland	27.50	6	13.323	58.1667	6	28.75703	1.7086	.25545
Summit	28.33	6	19.916	158.6250	6	145.90577	2.0010	.50148
Sun Belt	31.00	10	10.220	114.0500	10	51.49350	2.0140	.21161
SWAC	10.00	5	14.142	52.0000	5	16.04681	1.6981	.14312
WAC	28.75	8	11.573	107.2500	8	78.95161	1.9078	.36818
WCC	37.78	9	24.889	230.3056	9	215.17630	2.2236	.36176

**Table 2.** Comparison of Conferences on AEI Total Scores and Learfield Directors’ Cup Final Points (Continuation of Table 2.)

Conference	AEI Scores			Directors’ Cup Final Points			Director’s Cup Final Points Log Transformation	
	M	N	SD	M	N	SD	M	SD
ACC	55.67	15	28.276	636.9833	15	299.36852	2.7479	.24450
American East	41.11	9	26.667	76.6111	9	72.45075	1.7427	.35769
American	38.18	11	11.677	150.2273	11	96.64998	2.0643	.36681
ASUN	24.44	9	20.378	103.2778	9	81.03553	1.9128	.31385
Atlantic 10	43.89	9	29.977	86.0556	9	35.89607	1.8948	.20799
Big 12	49.50	10	34.355	648.7750	10	350.15886	2.7614	.21832
Big East	31.36	11	14.678	181.5909	11	136.97734	2.1223	.38763
Big Sky	39.44	9	13.566	110.1667	9	105.12403	1.8857	.38153
Big South	20.00	6	10.488	105.0417	6	91.48667	1.8678	.41104
Big Ten	59.29	14	23.847	645.3036	14	266.51545	2.7817	.15443
Big West	48.33	9	24.622	97.8889	9	54.29881	1.9099	.31834
CAA	43.33	9	24.749	98.8333	9	50.92028	1.9285	.27511
Conference USA	26.07	14	14.166	104.9643	14	43.15957	1.9838	.19556
Horizon League	49.44	9	28.443	43.3889	9	25.86718	1.5709	.25408
Ivy League	77.50	8	27.646	387.5313	8	257.43329	2.4819	.36193
MAAC	43.33	9	26.575	60.6667	9	41.43066	1.7043	.27049
MAC	41.36	11	31.945	97.2727	11	56.19625	1.9000	.31427
MEAC	15.00	4	4.082	49.1250	4	33.71047	1.6198	.28151

**Note:** Final Points scores from the Learfield Directors’ Cup are in raw score and log transformation forms.

## DISCUSSION

While athletic departments operate within a hyper-commercialized institutional setting and have adopted logics that emphasize the pursuit of revenue acquisition (e.g., Corr et al., 2020; Nite et al., 2019; Southall & Staurowsky, 2013), the findings from this study indicate that LQBTQI+ inclusive initiatives are of strategic value to administrators in pursuit of athletic success and, subsequently, revenue acquisition. As athletic department revenue is inextricably linked to success in collegiate athletics (i.e., winning), the dominant institutional logic pervasive to collegiate athletics, specifically among NCAA Division I member institutions, can remain in place while progressive and inclusive practices and cultures are incorporated into such embedded operating logic (Atwater et al., 2022; Lazaric, 2010; Kim et al., 2022; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Such findings align with extant literature (e.g., Cunningham 2009; 2015; Turk et al., 2019; Walker & Melton, 2019); and are indicative of the necessitation (both ethically and financially) of cultivating socially inclusive cultures within collegiate athletic departments.

Given that institutional athletic stakeholders seek to replicate successful athletic departments, the relationship between LQBTQI+ inclusion and athletic department success cannot be understated. Replication through the transfer of people, accordingly, includes the transfer of organizational values – both constructive and destructive (i.e., deviance) – to the organization seeking to replicate. Such logic transplantation inherently involves “the relocation of a whole or partial institutional logic from a home location to a host location” (Tan & Wong, 2011, p. 377). As athletic administrators and pertinent stakeholders seek to replicate successful athletic departments, athletic departments situated highly in Directors’ Cup rankings inclination to be more inclusive of LQBTQI+ organizational members portends positively across the field of collegiate athletics. Such inclusion among athletic departments is reflective of social initiatives seeking inclusivity among marginalized populations and is a striking juxtaposition to the historical patriarchal arrangement and heteronormative formation of collegiate athletics.



## CONCLUSION

LGBTQI+ inclusive athletic departments inherently have a more supportive workplace environment. Within such a supportive workplace environment, organizational members are inclined to have greater rates of workplace satisfaction and, accordingly, productivity. Given increasing rates of employee satisfaction and workplace productivity, it stands to reason that inclusive athletic departments would function more efficiently and effectively. Accordingly, while replication of inclusive athletic departments is of social value, the findings of this study illustrate that organizational replication of athletic departments with LGBTQI+ inclusive practices can serve as a mechanism in which to achieve success in collegiate athletics.

As evidenced by the deep seeded social tensions affecting marginalized groups, embedded and replicated logics often do not change (Atwater et al., 2022; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). However, the duality between preservation of traditionally successful organizational practices and progressivity is distinctly beneficial for organizations that exist within competitive marketplaces (Atwater et al., 2022; Lazaric, 2010). While the findings of this study are illustrative of the direct benefit to athletic departments in fostering an inclusive culture, the specific finding indicating SEC member institutions as less inclusive of LGBTQI+ members is noteworthy. Given the geographic formation (and corresponding history) of SEC member institutions, an examination of inclusivity among SEC members institutions is warranted. While cultural customs and norms can serve as barriers to organizational replication, the transfer of people can mitigate much of this deterrent to the replication of progressive organizational practices (Atwater et al., 2022; Baden-Fuller & Winter, 2005; Sake, 2004).

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***Author(s)' statements on ethics and conflict of interest***

**Ethics statement:** We hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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