Growing a staff takes teaching and mentoring, dialogue and discussion. Adding an inclusive environment can make your program fully bloom.

By Laura Ulrich

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In his work as a diversity training consultant, Richard Lapchick visits about 20 college campuses a year to speak to athletic department staffs. In most cases, administrators at the schools believe everything’s fine with their diversity initiatives and are just looking for a little outside expertise.

“When I arrive at the airport, I usually find that a woman or a person of color has been sent to pick me up,” says Lapchick, Professor at the University of Central Florida College of Business Administration and Founder and Director Emeritus of Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sport in Society. “The athletic director who sent them would probably be surprised to hear that nine times out of 10, once we start talking, that person says to me, ‘Can you help me find a job at another school? I don’t feel welcome here.’ Things are not as fine as many administrators think they are.”

In recent years, the issue of diversity in athletic department hiring has made headlines. Annual reports on racial and gender breakdowns in the coaching and administrative ranks receive widespread media attention. Hiring practices are scrutinized and schools are graded on their high profile searches. So it’s become standard practice for athletic directors to ask, How diverse is our candidate pool and how can we attract more minority applicants?

Another question, however, often goes unasked: What happens after a diverse staff is hired? “When it comes to diversity in athletics, changing the numbers is important,” Lapchick says. “But changing the climate is even more critical.”

“Diversity is one of the most important issues in athletics today, and it’s not just about black and white and male and female,” says Rick Villarreal, Athletic Director at the University of North Texas, which won a 2007 Diversity in Athletics Award from the Laboratory for Diversity in Sport at Texas A&M University. “Employees today come from a range of backgrounds and have an array of needs and experiences. We need to talk about ways to welcome and take advantage of that diversity, because it can be our biggest asset.”
LEADING THE WAY

An inclusive environment starts with a leader who genuinely values diversity and communicates that through both words and actions. “An athletic department’s stance on diversity starts at the top,” says Gene Smith, Athletic Director at Ohio State University. “The rest of the department is watching to see how the athletic director carries him- or herself. If he or she makes it clear that diversity is important, it becomes a lot easier to create the right environment. If the athletic director sends the wrong message, that also is quickly reflected in the department environment.”

“Staff members definitely know where the leader stands,” agrees Kelly Landry Mehrten, Athletic Director at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. “When the climate is right, there is an attitude of openness, inclusion, and respect. There is a relationship based on trust, and it’s obvious the athletic director is seeing people, not colors or genders.”

Talking directly about the issue is key. “It doesn’t work to remain silent and hope people know where you stand,” says Villarreal. “I’ve started speaking more frequently about this topic. At least two times a year, I use our all-staff meeting to discuss inclusion and the fact that in our department, everybody is treated with the same respect and nothing else will be accepted.”

Those meetings have been important for Cinnamon Sheffield, Associate Athletic Director for Student Services and Senior Woman Administrator at North Texas. “When the head athletic director stands in front of everybody and says, ‘Diversity is important to me, we are all a team, and here is how I expect people to treat one another,’ it makes a difference,” Sheffield says.

Smith tries to find ways to talk about diversity that will get his staff’s attention and they will connect with. “I’ll tell them, ‘If you look at an offensive line, you’ll see five guys who are of different races, different religions, different socio-economic backgrounds, and different values,’” he explains. “‘Every game, we ask them to come together and execute 75 or 80 plays, forgetting about their differences and striving for a common goal.’

“Now let’s say I have a team of event managers,” Smith continues. “We put on 500 events a year, and I’m asking them to come together to plan, communicate, and work, forgetting about whether they’re black or white, Catholic or Jewish, male or female. I tell them that if they can do that, we’re a team.”

By making diversity a regular part of the department conversation, Smith has found that his words are starting to come back to him. “I give these speeches to my staff and ultimately, they start spreading the word, echoing what I’m saying in their own way,” he says. “When that happens, I know they’ve heard me and they understand.”

Another way to send the message that you value diversity as a leader is to celebrate it within your department. “When Martin Luther King Jr. Day or Latino history month
comes around, do things to recognize the event—for example, invite a speaker for a department-wide meeting,” says Lapchick. “Do some research and celebrate minorities who broke barriers in your athletic department. Who was the first black athlete at your school or in your conference? How about the first female administrator? These are simple things, but they send a powerful message.”

TRAINING & STRATEGIES
Along with having open, ongoing conversation, taking a timeout to focus on diversity is also critical. “Athletic directors need to get past the idea that training is only something you need to do if something has gone wrong,” says Lapchick. “Getting proactive about this issue is exactly how you avoid having problems.”

In fact, diversity management training is especially important for athletic departments because of the camaraderie and relaxed climate they tend to have. “Here at North Texas, we have an informal atmosphere where people can walk into each other’s offices to talk any time,” says Villarreal. “There’s a lot of banter and sharing of ideas, and that’s a great thing.

“However, it also creates the opportunity for things to be said that could be taken the wrong way,” he continues. “Because of cultural differences, or sexual orientation differences, or any number of other differences, someone may be offended. We’re incorporating more training to make sure that doesn’t happen. It gets things out on the table, and starts conversations we otherwise wouldn’t have, and then we can openly discuss the issues.”

Lapchick provides training that begins with an assessment, provides staff with an opportunity to discuss potential solutions, and culminates in a written plan of action. “Before we come to campus, we have staff members fill out anonymous questionnaires,” he says. “We ask them to identify the six major diversity issues in the department, such as hiring, retention, climate, or opportunity for advancement. They can also say there are no issues. We discuss the most frequently mentioned topics with the administration beforehand and use them to set training goals.”

Next, Lapchick breaks participants into random groups of no more than 25. “We usually do exercises that are highly participatory,” he explains. “One exercise is called ‘Tug of War,’ where a statement is made regarding a diversity issue and the participants are asked to pick a side, or if they are not sure, to stay in the middle. For example, a question could be: Do affirmative action programs negatively affect white males?

“Then proponents and opponents of the statement must argue their case to those in the middle or on the other side,” continues Lapchick, emphasizing that what is said in these groups remains confidential. “It is always fascinating to see people deciding, especially when they change sides.”
From there, a strategy for improvement is developed. “An action plan should contain attainable goals and ways to measure them so they can see meaningful progress,” Lapchick says.

Mehrtens says it’s important to tailor any plan to specific department needs. “For example, if you determine that you have an issue with retaining people of color, you need different action steps than if you realize you haven’t hired people of color or that you have a problem with your overall climate,” she says.

One of the best ways to ensure follow-through is to form a diversity action team to keep pushing the department’s diversity goals forward. “We encourage departments to create a group to make sure the blueprint is followed,” Lapchick says. “The group should be diverse in terms of race and gender and have representatives from different levels of the department. We find it works best to ask for volunteers first. If the group that comes together isn’t a cross section, invite or appoint additional people.”

**SUBTLE BARRIERS**

As Lapchick’s story at the start of this article illustrates, just because all seems well within a department doesn’t mean diversity issues don’t lurk beneath the surface. While allegations of discrimination generate the most heat, simmering problems may cause just as much damage. And many of these problems may not be apparent to non-minorities.

“It is important for an athletic director to understand that being a minority in the workplace is different from being a non-minority,” Lapchick says. “A non-minority person can go to work every day and never think about their race or gender. But if you’re a woman or a person of color, you do have to think about it.”

An activity Lapchick uses in diversity management training illustrates the point. “We ask people to write down the groups they most identify with,” he says. “People come up with 25 or 30 categories including religion, ethnicity, profession, and family. Then we read off the categories and ask people to stand whenever we say one they wrote down.

“When we say ‘gender,’ it’s almost always only women who stand up, and when we say ‘race,’ it’s almost always people of color,” he continues. “It’s very rare for a white person to name race as one of the ways they identify themselves, and it’s very rare for a man to include gender. They don’t think about those elements of their identity because it doesn’t affect them. But for a woman or a person of color, those parts of their identity shape their experiences.

“For example, they may face the assumption by others that they were hired or promoted simply because they are a woman or a person of color. That can make them wonder, ‘Do people really see that I have this talent I can contribute, or did they just hire me to fill a quota?’ Working with those underlying questions can be difficult.”
Athletic administrators must also understand that some roadblocks for minorities result from subtle, and often unintentional, forms of discrimination. “This is a difficult thing to say, but there is still a group of people within athletics who are used to sitting around the table with white men,” Sheffield says. “Their world has been very homogenous and they have trouble letting other people in. The mentality seems to be, ‘This has always been our world.’ It creates a barrier. Sometimes you know they’re not really hearing your ideas or seeing your contribution because you don’t fit the mold.

“There has to be a climate where people feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints even if they aren’t mainstream,” she continues. “Here at North Texas, when I sit in senior staff meetings, I know I can speak my mind and my perspective will be heard. I also know the rest of our senior staff is open to saying, ‘Wow, I had never thought about this issue in that manner before.’”

As a woman who has served as the athletic director for men’s sports, Mehrtens has experienced times when it was clear people questioned whether she belonged. “Sometimes a person’s tone and body language says, ‘Are you really the person I need to be dealing with? Who is the man in charge here?’” she says. “It can be hard for them to accept that a woman is their supervisor.”

Another subtle barrier is the perception that opportunities at the very top are not open. “Having the sense that you can’t get where you want to go because your drive and ability are not the only things determining the outcome can be very discouraging,” Villarreal says.

**THE CAREER CLIMB**

Part of solving the larger diversity puzzle is breaking that glass ceiling. Many administrators are moving this initiative forward by focusing on mentoring.

“We have a major focus here on making sure our unit supervisors know what their employees are trying to accomplish in their careers,” Smith says. “That goes for everyone, regardless of gender or ethnicity. If you want to be a head coach, or if you want to be an athletic director, we make sure the people you’re working with know so they can help you grow toward it.”

Smith also believes in immersing minority employees in every aspect of the department’s operations. “I make sure they are embedded in everything we do,” he says. “That helps our department benefit from a diverse perspective in many areas and also helps their professional development.”

At North Texas, Villarreal does all he can to find leadership opportunities for employees, even if it means going outside the department. “I look for chances to put my minority staff members on committees where they will have a voice in making important decisions,” he says. “That can include everything from a campus-wide search committee to my athletic council.”
Beyond program-wide initiatives, one-on-one mentoring can play a key role in helping staff members develop. Mehrten found it helpful early in her career to speak with African-American women already in the field who had gone through some of the same things she was experiencing. However, Smith feels it’s important not to restrict the definition of mentor to someone of the same gender or ethnicity.

“A lot of our African-American male staff members come to me for mentoring,” Smith says. “But as I mentor them, I urge them to expand their circle. I tell them, ‘Don’t think about color. Think about experience. Know what your career goals are and then seek out people who already know what you need to learn.’ You definitely do not have to be the same race or gender to have a great mentoring relationship.”

Regardless of your own race or ethnicity, Mehrten believes the first step in being a good mentor is helping the person develop confidence in their own abilities. “I start out by teaching, ‘Don’t get caught up in what other people think,’” she says. “There are always going to be stereotypes, but someone else’s perception of you doesn’t have to become your reality. My own mentors taught me that. They said, ‘You have to have a thick skin in this business, and you can’t take things personally. Decide who you want to be and then be that person.’”

Mehrten also encourages the women she mentors to look beyond roles in academic support or compliance. “That’s where so many women are in athletic administration, but I try to help them see they can break that mold,” she says. “I’ve held non-traditional positions and I tell them that they can, too.”

Smith pushes people to get involved and go outside their comfort zone. “I encourage the people I mentor to make themselves visible by stepping up and asking to be part of something,” he says. “I tell them, ‘Go talk to people. Volunteer. Make sure you’re in the front of their mind. That way, when someone needs help with a project, they’ll think of you—not because you’re black or because you’re female, but because they know you have energy and good ideas.’”

Those looking to climb the ladder should also know that being mentored is not a passive process. “I tell the people I mentor, ‘You have to know what you want out of the mentoring,’” Mehrten says. “Before they meet with the mentor, they should draft a plan so they can say, ‘Here are my goals and here are some ideas I have for reaching them. Do you have any advice?’”

Lastly, whether you are mentoring or supervising, it’s critical that any help be offered from a position of genuine respect. “You’re treading a fine line, because you risk implying that this person is less able to do their job and needs special help,” Smith says. “That’s part of the reason I don’t believe the solution is to offer special programs for minority employees. You need to take the right steps to help all your employees develop, while also understanding the unique challenges minorities might face. If you do that, your minority employees will have what they need: the freedom to use their talents and do their jobs.”
Far from regarding staff diversity as a problem to overcome, successful athletic directors today understand that it can be their organization’s biggest asset. For one, it can help a department be open to a broader range of viewpoints.

“If you sit in a room where everybody looks the same and thinks the same, you’ll often come up with what you think is a great solution,” says Rick Villarreal, Athletic Director at the University of North Texas. “But without knowing it, you may be missing a number of issues. Down the road, you’ll probably say, ‘Why didn’t we think of that?’

“When looking for perspectives on an issue, most people automatically think of asking someone who is similar to them,” he continues. “We need to get into the habit of asking, ‘Who on my staff would have a different perspective?’ and getting those people involved.”

“You utilize the diversity in your department by having diversity at the table,” agrees Kelly Landry Mehrten, Athletic Director at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. “If you have a diverse group of people looking at an issue, thoughts and ideas will come up that never would have in a homogenous environment.”

Emphasizing diversity in your department can also make you a better athletic director, according to Villarreal. “Growing as an athlete director is about having the right perspective and asking the right questions,” he says. “Staying in the same box and thinking about things the same way is dangerous in our business. I can honestly say my perspective grows every day because I surround myself with people who don’t see the world from my viewpoint. That will ultimately make me better at my job.”

The population of college student-athletes has never been more diverse, and it would seem like a natural progression for that diversity to make its way into the ranks of the athletic department staff. However, bridges may be needed to help that transition happen.

At the University of North Texas, Athletic Director Rick Villarreal is working to build one such bridge. “We’re creating two internship positions in our athletic department for minority undergraduate student-athletes who have exhausted their eligibility or have graduated with eligibility and are enrolling in graduate school,” he says. “We expect to start the program in the fall of 2008. The interns will work side by side with our staff members and see firsthand as many aspects of athletic administration as we can show them.”

Coaches and staff will be asked to be on the lookout for minority athletes with the interest and ability to forge a career in intercollegiate athletics. “We’ll watch them on the field and in the classroom and we’ll invite some of them to apply,” Villarreal says.
Villarreal believes the benefits will be twofold. “It will give them some great experience in athletic administration at a place they feel comfortable,” he says. “And we will benefit by having a staff member who has recently been an athlete in our program, which will give us a great window into how we can better serve our athletes.

“And at the end of the year,” he continues, “if we don’t have a permanent job for them, when someone asks, ‘Can you recommend a minority applicant for our job opening?’ I can say, ‘We have someone right here.’”

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