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ARTICLE

Establishing a "Safety Net": Exploring the Emergence and Maintenance of College Hockey Inc. and NCAA Division I Hockey

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National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division I schools compete with the Canadian Hockey League for top Canadian youth minor hockey players (ages 14–18). To address the challenges of adhering to NCAA's eligibility and recruitment regulations, the NCAA commissioners created College Hockey Inc. (CHI). One challenge facing new institutions such as CHI is establishing legitimacy as a means of penetrating a crowded organizational field. In this paper we examine what forces, actions, and events contributed to the creation of CHI and what forces, actions, or events contribute to maintaining CHI's relevance in their attempt to leverage NCAA Division I hockey with Canadian players and parents. *Educational Opportunities*, *Student Life Experiences*, *Player Development*, and *Professional Hockey Opportunities* were found to be discursive strategies used by CHI to gain pragmatic legitimacy and maintain the institution. Exploration of these strategies makes a number of practical and theoretical contributions to the field of sport management.

Keywords: organizational legitimacy, institutional theory, college sports, recruitment, institutional work

North American ice hockey is one of the few sports with two equally dominant and legitimate pathways for players striving to play at the professional level, for example, in the National Hockey League (NHL). These two institutions, the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) and the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division I, "have become stiff rivals when it comes to battling for the best players in Canada" (Naylor, 2002, p. S1). Although both of these institutions have existed since the early 1900s, little research has been conducted to examine their competitive response (i.e., strategies) for recruiting the most talented players from well-established hockey nations such as Canada.

The most talented Canadian amateur minor hockey players can transition from the amateur ranks and get drafted as young as age 15 by a CHL franchise. The CHL is a professional league, because some CHL players' rights are owned by NHL franchises and some of these players have competed in the NHL (e.g., Jonathan Drouin, Darnell Nurse, Max Domi). Players begin playing in the CHL as early as 16 years old. One of the primary goals of the CHL is to develop players for the NHL, and therefore competing in the CHL increases a player's likelihood of being drafted into the NHL.

The second player pathway consists of playing amateur hockey (e.g., club or "rep" hockey, or Junior A, B, C, or D) until age 18, and then the possibility of receiving a scholarship to play hockey for an NCAA Division I or III university or college, followed by the possibility of being drafted into the NHL. Players competing at the Division III level are less likely than Division I players to be drafted into the NHL. For the purposes of this study, we have focused on the NCAA Division I level and the six hockey conferences that exist within this level.

Two issues emerge from the existence of these two dominant NHL pathways. First, each pathway is associated with different rules for players and coaches. For example, whereas in some CHL franchises potential players can be scouted as early as age 12 (Hockey Canada, 2012), NCAA recruitment regulations prevent coaches and schools from contacting players that young. Furthermore, NCAA eligibility regulations prohibit a player

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who has played in the CHL from playing in the NCAA. The second issue is that while the NCAA is composed of U.S. colleges and universities, CHL franchises and NCAA schools heavily recruit Canadian players. Thus, because of the NCAA's eligibility rules, decisions made by or for Canadian hockey players between the ages of 14 and 16 have lasting and irrevocable consequences if the players ever decide to compete for a scholarship to attend a university or college and play hockey in the United States.

These regulations put the NCAA schools at a disadvantage compared with the CHL franchises. The NCAA rules, which were originally designed for college football and basketball (Kennedy, 2011), restrict NCAA coaches from recruiting potential players at a young age, and they do not necessarily align with the current competitive situation that exists within the sport of hockey. To further understand how this challenge has impacted NCAA schools, we examined the actions taken by the NCAA Division I commissioners to attract the most talented Canadian amateur hockey players to these schools while staying within the rules imposed by the NCAA. The commissioners of the six NCAA Division I hockey conferences created an institution known as College Hockey Inc. (CHI), which is an informational and marketing resource that acts on behalf of the NCAA in the recruitment of hockey players, mostly within North America. To better understand how CHI was created and how it assists in maintaining NCAA Division I schools' competitive position with respect to the CHL, we draw upon the literature on institutional theory—specifically, institutional work—to explore the creation and maintenance of CHI.

A growing area of research in the institutional theory literature is institutional work, which is concerned with "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). According to Micelotta and Washington (2013), "the concept of institutional work offers an important new way to frame institutional analysis" (p. 1137) and provides insight into how organizations are able to protect institutional arrangements (i.e., NCAA recruitment regulations) from the threat of external competitors (i.e., CHL) through the creation and maintenance of institutions. A foundational construct that has been discussed within the context of institutional theory is *organizational legitimacy* (also referred to in this article as *legitimacy*). The central premise of legitimacy, as discussed in a seminal study by Suchman (1995), is that members, clients, and stakeholders perceive an organization's actions to be desirable or proper. Thus, we offer a theoretical understanding of the work of creating and maintaining an institution by examining how key actors (the commissioners) created and maintained CHI (the institution) in response to the misalignment of two factors: the NCAA recruiting and eligibility regulations (i.e., institutional arrangements) in collegiate hockey, and the maintenance of legitimacy for NCAA Division I hockey within the North American hockey system.

Scholars in the field of sport management have conducted extensive research using institutional theory as a theoretical foundation for sport research (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Edwards, Mason, & Washington, 2009; O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Slack & Hinings, 1994; Washington & Patterson, 2011). Sport management studies have focused on understanding concepts such as isomorphism, legitimacy, institutionalization, organizational fields, and organizational homogeneity (Amis et al., 2004; Edwards et al., 2009; Kikulis, 2000; O'Brien & Slack, 2004; Silk & Amis, 2000; Slack & Hinings, 1994). However, the concept of institutional work is relatively unexplored in the context of sport management.

To further understand the creation and maintenance of CHI, we view the institutional work literature through a legitimacy lens and pose two research questions. The first question is, What forces, actions, and/or events contributed to the creation of CHI? Here our focus is on examining the institutional creation of CHI by the NCAA commissioners, and how they established legitimacy as a means of penetrating the organizational field. The second question is, What forces, actions, or events have contributed to maintaining CHI's relevance in their attempt to leverage NCAA Division I hockey with Canadian hockey players and parents? Here, we focus on institutional maintenance and legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

In the pages that follow we first discuss the empirical setting for this study. Then we establish the theoretical framework and provide an overview of the methods used to gather and analyze the data. Next, we present the findings, followed by a discussion that revisits the findings with the theory. The paper concludes with a review of the contributions and suggestions for future research.

Empirical Setting

In penetrating the Canadian hockey system, NCAA Division I coaches are at a disadvantage when competing with CHL franchises for the recruitment of Canadian hockey players. CHI was created to offset this disadvantage. To better understand the creation and maintenance of CHI, we describe a key aspect of the institutional environment surrounding U.S. college hockey: the recruitment and eligibility regulations enacted and enforced by the NCAA.

Canadian hockey players, and their parents, face a considerable challenge in educating themselves on the different pathways available for their development as students and athletes. Two types of regulations affect whether a player will compete in NCAA Division I hockey: player eligibility regulations and recruitment regulations. These can have a significant impact on the decision processes for Canadian players deciding upon a pathway to the NHL.

Rules of Eligibility

In accordance with athlete eligibility and amateur status requirements, NCAA eligibility regulations deem a player

ineligible to play for a Division I school if the player competes for a professional organization or receives payment for playing hockey (NCAA, 2010). Furthermore, NCAA Regulation 12.2.3.2.4 states that "ice hockey teams in the United States and Canada, classified by the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association as Major Junior A teams [i.e., CHL], are considered professional teams under NCAA legislation" (NCAA, 2010, p. 72). Upon spending more than 48 hr with a CHL franchise, a player becomes ineligible to play in the NCAA (CHI, 2013c; NCAA, 2010). Canadian hockey players and parents are forced to decide between playing for a CHL franchise or for an NCAA Division I school, as the NCAA eligibility regulations prevent players from doing both.

Rules of Recruitment

The second type of regulation governs the recruitment of athletes/players by coaches, coaching staff, scouts, and athletic directors. Although a student may contact NCAA coaches by phone or in person, NCAA team representatives cannot initiate contact with, or reply to phone or e-mail messages from, a prospective player until June 15th of the student's sophomore year (CHI, 2013g). This becomes an issue particularly for players in the Western Hockey League (one of the regional CHL leagues), where the draft age is 14 years old. Because the CHL franchises' coaches and general managers are able to contact players at an earlier age, they have a recruitment advantage over NCAA coaches.

Theoretical Framework

In examining the empirical setting, we use institutional theory as an umbrella theory to discuss institutional work and legitimacy. Institutional theory has been used to describe how organizational processes and procedures impact the operations, structure, and programs of an organization. The main concept of institutional theory is that a particular pattern of doing things evolves over time and becomes perceived as legitimate by stakeholders, members, and/or clients (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2001). An institution is understood to be a "more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order" (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin-Andersson, & Suddaby, 2008, pp. 4–5). An institution can be categorized as either a *physical entity* (e.g., a governing sport body), where an organization is identified as an institution, or a *process* such as marriage or racism, where there is no physical structure (Jepperson, 1991). We understand CHI to be an example of an institution that is a physical entity.

Institutional Work

Building on institutional theory, we specifically draw on the current literature on institutional work (e.g., Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2012; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Quinn & Washington, 2009; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Rather than assuming that institutions are reinforced and perpetuated through some undefined process, institutional work, as an object of study, attempts to explicate precisely what efforts are undertaken—and by whom—in the preservation or transformation of the institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). The institutional work perspective moves institutional analysis forward by reconsidering the assumption that maintenance of the institutional structure is the "default" option.

Institutional work may occur at the micro- (Lok & de Rond, 2013) or the macrolevel (Trank & Washington, 2009). These processes may take place purposely, as in the case of institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004); coevolve with the institutions and supporting logics (Haveman & Rao, 1997); or follow the introduction of logics as a response to the higher level changes that have already infiltrated the existing field (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) identified three key areas of institutional work: the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions. Two of these (creation and maintenance) are discussed in this study.

Institutional creation. Although institutional creation has been identified within institutional theory and institutional work (e.g., Lawrence, Hardy, & Philips, 2002; Lawrence et al., 2011; Scott, 2001; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009), this concept has yet to be defined within the management and organizational literature. Zietsma and McKnight (2009) distinguished between collaborative cocreation and competitive convergence; in the latter, an actor adopts or responds to the "templates" of other actors. The catalyst for institutional creation is based on the development and recognition of a reoccurring problem to which the existing institution is unable to provide a satisfactory response in the views of the stakeholders (Scott, 2001). Within the context of this study, institutional creation refers to the process of competitive convergence on the part of the NCAA as a means of competing with the CHL for the most talented hockey players.

Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings (2002) indicated that the emergence of new "players" (e.g., CHI) within an organizational field disturbs "the socially constructed field-level consensus by introducing new ideas and thus the possibility of change" (p. 60). Thus institutional creation entails the emergence or intentional development of an institution that modifies, changes, challenges, or enhances the current institutional norms that exist within the organizational field (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2002; Lawrence et al., 2002; Lawrence et al., 2009; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010; Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). The objective of institutional creation, then, is to develop and implement practices and policies, take action, and provide positive messages about the institution to establish the legitimacy of the institution.

Institutional maintenance. Once an institution has been created, the objective becomes being able to maintain it. The concept of institutional maintenance has been a growing area within the institutional work literature (e.g., Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Quinn & Washington, 2009; Scott, 2013; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Institutional maintenance is the "active, strategic process of institutions to maintain their status and power in the field" (Quinn & Washington, 2009, p. 239) to protect the beneficial institutional arrangements from external threats (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). Institutional maintenance involves the use of "regulatory and legitimate authority" (Quinn & Washington, 2009, p. 239) such as rules, policies, and standards to reinforce the existing institution against threats. Legitimacy and social acceptance are critical for the survival and maintenance of the institution.

Legitimacy

Institutional theorists have recognized that acquiring and maintaining legitimacy and social support is imperative for an organization's chances of survival (e.g., Baum & Oliver, 1991; Deephouse, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Edwards et al., 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Organizational legitimacy originates in societal acceptance of an organization's actions and/or managerial decisions. Societal acceptance can be based on institutional norms that exist within a particular environment (Suchman, 1995) and can enhance an organization's ability to obtain resources (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Leiter, 2005). This is important to understand, as the focus of this study is on the work done by the commissioners to create and maintain CHI as an institution and to preserve the legitimacy of NCAA Division I hockey.

Suchman (1995) identified three types of legitimacy: moral, cognitive, and pragmatic. Moral legitimacy is constructed by an audience's value system and reflects beliefs about whether an activity is socially acceptable. Cognitive legitimacy reflects "acceptance of the organization as necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account" (p. 582). Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the self-interests of an organization's constituents (Bitektine, 2011) and on perceptions that an action or attribute of the organization will "yield tangible benefits for the organization and its stakeholders" (Thomas & Lamm, 2012, p. 193).

Of the three types of legitimacy that Suchman (1995) identified, we focus on pragmatic legitimacy as a means of understanding how the NCAA commissioners created and used CHI. Pragmatic legitimacy can, in turn, be subdivided into three areas: exchange, influence, and dispositional legitimacy. Exchange legitimacy is the "support for an organizational policy based on that policy's expected value to a particular set of constituents," while influential legitimacy means that "constituents support the organization not necessarily because they believe that it provides specific favorable exchanges, but rather because they see it as being responsive to their larger interests" (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Finally, in the case of dispositional legitimacy, the stakeholders are likely to assign legitimacy to those organizations whose motives or values are compatible with their own.

Method

Qualitative research was employed through a case study methodology as a means of exploring the institutional creation and maintenance of CHI. Researchers use case studies to develop an understanding of individuals' accounts of real-life events that occur in organizations (Yin, 2003). By taking a case study approach, we were able to gather firsthand accounts of experts who emerged within the current empirical setting.

Data Collection

Data were collected by conducting phone interviews with representatives from the CHL, Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS; the governing body for university sport in Canada), Hockey Canada (HC; the governing body for hockey in Canada), and CHI. The interviewees selected from the different organizations were employed within, and had firsthand knowledge and experience of, the empirical setting. Positions that the interview participants held within the institutions included president, scout, player development director, chair of coaching committee, director, and executive board member. In total, the researchers conducted 10 interviews. The CIS representatives were selected to help support and contrast the responses provided by the representatives of the CHL and CHI, to provide a more complete understanding of the system through which these actors are able to operate.

Ethical and privacy considerations led the researchers to devise a coding system in which the designations Participant 1 (P1) through Participant 10 (P10) represented the 10 subjects who were interviewed. The researchers conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, which in turn allowed for focused, two-way conversational communication (Shank, 2002). The questions explored the recruitment strategies, regulations, policies, and processes of each organization. Interviews ranged between 40 and 60 min in duration. With the interviewees' consent, the researchers audio recorded all interviews.

In addition, data were collected from the organizations' websites and documents, as well as from magazines, newspapers, and *The Hockey News*. Newspaper data were collected from newspapers throughout Canada (e.g., *Edmonton Journal*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Windsor Star*, *National Post*). Previous research has used media reports to operationalize legitimacy because these reports are able to reach and influence the readers (e.g., Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Lamertz & Baum, 1998). The data set consisted of (a) information regarding the mission statement, vision statement, long-term goals, short-term goals, rules (e.g., hockey game rules), regulations (e.g.,

recruitment and eligibility regulations), history of each organization, and (b) articles that generally discuss the CHL, CIS, HC, NCAA, and CHI.

Data Analysis

The researchers took an interpretive approach to the analysis of the data set (both interview transcripts and supplemental information). *Interpretivism* is used to comprehend social actions and the meanings behind those actions and to better understand the world in which interviewees live and work (Creswell, 2003; Outhwaite, 1975). Researchers who use interpretivism "seek to explain the reasons for intentional action in relation to the whole set of concepts and practices in which they are embedded" (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, p. 37). It is through these interpretations that categories and themes, which are based on the participants' views and opinions, are developed and identified (Creswell, 2003).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in more than 80 pages of interview data. Each interview was then reviewed and analyzed by the researchers. Data analysis consisted of five stages (Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first was a familiarization stage during which the researchers became familiar with the data by reviewing the recorded interviews, transcribing the interview data, analyzing websites, reviewing documents and media sources (i.e., newspapers and magazine articles), and studying notes taken in connection with the interviews.

The second stage consisted of identifying a thematic framework from the data. The researchers examined interview transcripts line by line for themes, which are identifiable concepts that are consistently discussed. The themes relevant to the study emerged according to the frequency of their occurrence in the responses and through inductive reasoning. "Concepts [i.e., themes] are *precursors to constructs* in making sense of organizational worlds" (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013, p. 16). Constructs are discussed at the end of this section.

Themes originated from real-life examples that the interviewees provided in their transcribed interviews (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) and from the data that were collected from websites, documents, and magazines and newspapers. The researchers coded specific text patterns and regularities to support the development of conclusions (Trochim, 2006). One determinant of a theme's relevance was the frequency of the responses. Of the themes identified, *Educational Opportunities*, *Student Life Experiences*, *Player Development*, and *Professional Hockey Opportunities* were the most prevalent.

In the third stage, themes were indexed by applying codes to corresponding quotes and information collected from all data sources. The fourth stage involved the charting and organization of the data using a computer program called QSR NVivo 8. This software organizes data sets into documents based on coding. For example, the *Educational Opportunities* document contained information from the data sets comprising interview quotations linked with scholarships. The software identified each quotation by organization and participant number. Such a mapping proved extremely helpful in managing and further processing the large amount of information that the study collected.

The fifth was the interpretive stage, which involved the categorization of the data with respect to the specific themes that were identified in the second stage as those corresponding to the institutional framework and legitimacy. Based on the findings, we undertook a deeper analysis to answer the second research question by using a matrix to see how the concepts, examples, and constructs interacted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The construction of the matrix allowed specific quotes to be linked with the theoretical framework, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of Interviewees' Responses That Identify With First-Order Constructs

Concept	Quotes (Examples)	First-Order Construct
Educational opportunities	"If a player is good enough to earn a Division I scholarship, essentially what you're getting is a free, world class education at the value of $250,000 where you don't have to pay a dime out of your pocket." (Participant 10 [P10] of CHI)	Exchange legitimacy/dispositional legitimacy
Student life experiences	"The college experience goes far beyond the rink and the classroom. Time spent with teammates and classmates, dorm life and school spirit. . . ." (CHI, 2013h)	Influential legitimacy/dispositional legitimacy
Player development	"For the aspiring National Hockey League player, college hockey offers the ideal practice-to-game ratio to build skills and prepare for a career in professional hockey." (CHI, 2013f, Time to Practice section)	Dispositional legitimacy
Professional hockey opportunities	"So if your goal is to play in the NHL, you know why not do it through the college route where you're not only working toward your goal to make it to the NHL but at the same time you're getting yourself an education so if and when your hockey career does end, you've already got your education and you're set up to go and then you can move on to the next phase of your life." (P10 of CHI)	Influential legitimacy/dispositional legitimacy

A construct is an abstract theoretical formulation about a phenomenon of interest (Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000; Gioia et al., 2013). The matrix contained quotes that corresponded to a construct based on the different types of pragmatic legitimacy: exchange, influential, and dispositional legitimacy. The researchers relied on the interview data, additional data, and the literature on institutional work and legitimacy to develop an understanding of how the construct shown in Table 1 correlated with the data collected. Thus, through inductive reasoning we moved from specific observations to a broad set of generalizations and observations (Trochim, 2006) relating to institutional work and legitimacy. All three types of legitmacy (i.e., pragmatic, moral, and cognitive) were considered throughout the analysis process, and the researchers determined that the findings were a reflection of pragmatic legitimacy.

Findings

"Hockey is the thread that weaves through Canada's culture, through villages, towns, cities, provinces and country" ("Hockey, Not NHL," 2004, p. A26). Hockey organizations operating at different levels within the Canadian hockey system produce an overabundance of youth elite-level hockey players wanting to take the CHL route, and some of these players look to alternative options such as the NCAA to further their hockey careers. Matheson (2011) reported that of the 1,500 players in the NCAA, 496 (approximately 33%) were Canadians. Because of the limited spots available in the CHL, the question becomes, Is the NCAA really directly competing with CHL? The answer is yes. According to P6 of the CHL, "the U.S. colleges are our number one competition," and P8 of the CIS suggested that Canada is an attractive option for the NCAA for recruiting hockey players.

NCAA interest in Canadian players is arguably due to the strong player development system in Canada (which is evidenced by the consistently high numbers of Canadian players advancing to the NHL each year). To win national championships and have the strongest hockey program, NCAA schools seek the most talented hockey players to represent their school. With this in mind, college hockey commissioners created CHI as the "marketing arm" of the NCAA. The following sections describe the background of the creation of CHI and their offerings, the initial challenges faced by CHI, and the legitimizing discourse provided to Canadian potential players and their parents about the benefits of playing hockey in the NCAA.

Background on the Creation of CHI and Their Offerings

In 2010 the commissioners of the six NCAA hockey conferences created and endorsed a company called College Hockey Inc., which is financially supported through player development fees provided to USA Hockey as part of the money that the NHL provides for the development of hockey players (P10 of CHI). The role of this organization is to make presentations to prospective hockey players on behalf of the 59 NCAA Division I coaches (P5 and P10 of CHI). CHI was formed to "sell young players on all the NCAA brand of hockey offers to them" (Duff, 2010, p. S8) and to essentially clarify the ambiguities associated with playing for an NCAA school and NCAA Division I league. According to P6 of the CHL, "The colleges are very ineffective in not being as clear as they need to be in how a U.S. college scholarship works on the athletic side." Thus,

> College Hockey Inc. is an informational resource that helps players and parents navigate the waters of NCAA recruiting and eligibility regulations. . . . A lot of Canadian kids aren't familiar with the NCAA route because unfortunately it's not on TV a lot up there, so College Hockey Inc. introduces them to NCAA Division I hockey. Due to the different rules and regulations, there are unfortunately a bunch of them, and sometimes it can be a little hairy and the next thing you know you're ineligible, and representatives of College Hockey Inc. just try and educate them on that entire process. (P10 of CHI)

CHI also promotes the NCAA brand to American, and to a lesser extent European, hockey players, but its main focus is on Canadian players when they are deciding whether to play in the CHL or NCAA. NCAA Division I coaches were finding that because of the differences in eligibility and recruitment regulations, Canadian players had already signed contracts and played with CHL franchises before NCAA coaches were permitted to approach those players, which gave the CHL a competitive advantage. Now, however,

> College Hockey Inc. are able to go where the coaches themselves can't go. College Hockey Inc. are able to go talk to elite groups of kids at younger ages and give them information about the NCAA option and hopefully convince them to hang on to their eligibility so that they at least have a chance to talk to some of these colleges that might be interested in recruiting them. (P5 of CHI)

The representatives also highlighted other responsibilities of CHI, including promoting college hockey in the U.S. and Canadian market, coming up with special events that promote the U.S. college game, and "[getting] college hockey more into the mainstream, whether it be TV time or Internet or advertising and just trying to grow and build the game" (P10 of CHI).

One of the ways in which representatives of CHI provide Canadian players with advice and information about educational and playing opportunities within the NCAA is through Collegiate Hockey Summits, which allow for NCAA coaches to provide information indirectly to Canadian players without violating any of the

recruitment regulations enforced by the NCAA. These summits are held in different cities across Canada. P10 of CHI described a hockey summit for the top 70 young players (17 and 18 years old) in the greater Toronto area:

> [CHI] did a presentation for them as well as two on-ice sessions. Two little scrimmages were held, where representatives from College Hockey Inc. split them up into four teams and had over 25 Division I college coaches there to scout them, watch them, and just introduce them to the NCAA as a viable option and route you know that they're not necessarily familiar with, you know a lot of those kids have just heard only about the OHL [Ontario Hockey League, a subleague of the CHL] and Major Junior, and College Hockey Inc. just wants to let them know that college hockey is a great route as well.

Initial Legitimacy Challenges Faced by CHI

The initial emergence of CHI was framed through the media as challenging the validity and intentions of the CHL. P3 of the CHL described the situation as follows: "The climate right now is an us-versus-them. I know the NCAA has taken some steps lately that to create a group [i.e., CHI] that kinda does recruiting and is getting out there and trying to take players." CHI's strategy for operating in this type of environment was to hire former NHL Players' Association executive director Paul Kelly as its executive director. An article in the *Vancouver Sun* suggested that this led to further conflict: "Working on behalf of the NCAA, Kelly has attempted to discredit the CHL, along with elements of its programs practices and policies" (Harder, 2010, p. E2). Kelly resigned as executive director in February 2012. Up to 2010, the media discourse surrounding the competitive environment consistently described the situation between the CHL and NCAA recruitment of Canadian hockey players as a feud or an "us-versus-them" situation. Then the media discourse changed to reflect a more positive approach on the part of CHI, with less emphasis on comparing and discrediting the CHL. We found that following concepts were being framed by CHI: *Educational Opportunities*, *Student Life Experiences*, *Player Development,* and *Professional Hockey Opportunities*.

Educational Opportunities

Both P5 and P10 of CHI pointed out that while playing hockey, a player can receive an education that prepares the student for life after hockey:

> One of the values at the NCAA path is that not only do you have an equal shot at making it to the National Hockey League from Division I college hockey, but you're also obtaining an education at the same time and in most instances it's a world class education at one of the top institutions anywhere. (P5 of CHI)

Furthermore, "College Hockey Inc.'s goal is to help the sport's best young players keep their options open about their future" (CHI, 2010, p. 42). This strategy focuses not only on the player's competing within an elite league that can provide an opportunity to reach the NHL but also on education. As indicated on the CHI website,

> More than 85 percent of college hockey players graduate with a college degree, setting themselves up for success after their hockey career. . . . Even for those players who reach the highest level, very few play in the NHL past their mid-30s. That leaves decades of life ahead—and college hockey prepares its athletes for both the NHL and what lies beyond. (CHI, 2013a)

In cases where NCAA players do not reach the NHL, they have the "safety net" of being educated at an NCAA school, and many are able to pursue high-level career opportunities in law, engineering, government, medicine, or sports management.

In 2007, the average cost of a 4-year education at an NCAA Division I university or college without a scholarship was estimated at $187,936.00 (Krukowska et al., 2007). To offset these costs, "Division I hockey programs award more than $30 million in scholarships, unquestionably the most significant education program in the sport" (CHI, 2013a). The individual NCAA schools are responsible for awarding and administering scholarships to their players, and they offer over $2 billion in scholarships annually to more than 145,000 student athletes in various sports. If a player is "good enough to earn a Division I scholarship, essentially what you're getting is a free, world class education at the value of $250,000 where you don't have to pay a dime out of your pocket" (P10 of CHI).

Therefore, the target message strategy in this regard is focused on two potential consumers—the players and their parents—and CHI have to gain and establish legitimacy from both groups. Whereas parents are interested in "how to catch the attention of the college coaches, how to get admitted and get a scholarship, and the value of the education," the players themselves are more interested in "whether they'll have a have a chance to develop their hockey skills and have a shot at playing in the NHL" (CHI, 2010, p. 42).

Student Life Experiences

Student life on a college campus can be an important factor in convincing Canadian players to attend an NCAA school. CHI is able to frame student life as an opportunity to be part of a university or college community and build on social aspects outside the hockey environment. For example, the CHI website points out that

> College life helps students develop a sense of independence and confidence while building friendships that last a lifetime. The bonds between college teammates last forever, as do friendships with classmates (and often future spouses). . . . As many as ten

> thousand fans sing their school fight song after every goal. School spirit creates an atmosphere not experienced anywhere else in the world. (CHI, 2013h)

Player Development

Another focus of CHI was to provide information about player development, specifically coaching, games, practices, and strength and conditioning. CHI stresses the quality of NCAA coaches: "NCAA hockey has, arguably, the finest collection of knowledgeable, experienced, accomplished coaches in the world outside of the NHL" (CHI, 2013f, Coaching section). According to CHI, player development at the university and college level calls on a coach's ability to "build more than just a player. The mentality that coach needs to teach those players beyond on-ice skills is something that is often critically important for their overall mission" (CHI, 2013b, p. 14). Thus, CHI promotes the idea that the coaching a Canadian player receives at an NCAA Division I school rivals that of any league outside the NHL. This is a powerful statement that can be interpreted as potentially discrediting the qualifications and success of CHL coaches.

Games, practices, and strength and conditioning training are three areas of focus for the development of players. A player's development process is accelerated during games against teams that include "older, stronger, and faster opponents" (CHI, 2013f, Games section). Furthermore, "for the aspiring National Hockey League player, college hockey offers the ideal practice-to-game ratio to build skills and prepare for a career in professional hockey" (Time to Practice section). P10 of CHI also stressed the practice-to-game ratio, as well as differences between NCAA and CHL game schedules:

> If you make it to the final games, Frozen Four [national men's hockey tournament for NCAA Division I hockey], you might play 45 games. So there's a lot more of a, there's a lot more practice in the NCAA where you only play, typically you'll play Saturday, excuse me Friday, Saturday nights and you'll practice you know five times a week or four times a week and you'll also have weight training throughout the week as well, in season and out of season. Whereas in Major Junior [CHL] you're doing a lot of long bus trips, you're missing a large amount of school and there isn't necessarily the emphasis on the practice and the off-ice strength conditioning that there is in the college game.

Overall a player's development is framed around the NCAA's ability to have players make it to the NHL.

Professional Hockey Opportunities

Another means that CHI uses to maintain the NCAA's legitimacy is explaining to potential players and parents the *Professional Hockey Opportunities* that exist for NCAA players. The CHL promotes the same opportunities, as P4 of the CHL explained:

> It's tough to get in the NHL; the NHL has 30 teams, with 20 players, it's 600 players [these are approximate numbers] from around the world. Let's say it's 50,000 guys that are right there at the doorstep to the NHL, so they won't all make it obviously. . . . [The CHL] option is the best one for a player that has a dream to go play in the NHL. We have a routine that is the closest to the NHL with the number of games, with the practices every day, so hockey-wise, I think we have a great program with the best players available in Canada.

To offset the CHL's claims, CHI indicates on its website that college hockey is a proven route to the NHL and that the NHL's influence on the college game is growing. CHI's strategy is to provide statistics about the number of collegiate athletes playing in the NHL. For example, in 2011–2012, 30% (n = 301) of all NHL players were former college hockey players (CHI, 2013e).

Of the 817 players competing in the NHL in 2010, 447 were graduates of the CHL, and 213 were from the NCAA (OHL, 2010). However, CHI (2013e) argues that "a hockey player taking the college hockey route to the NHL is just as likely to be selected in the NHL Draft as a player in Canadian Major Junior [i.e., CHL]." This strategy is implanted through testimonials on their websites through videos or direct quotes from recognizable NHL players who competed in the NCAA. For example, Jonathan Toews, a Canadian who played for the University of North Dakota and now plays for the Chicago Blackhawks, is quoted as saying, "For me, college hockey was obviously the best step I could have taken to get to the next level" (CHI, 2013e). P10 of CHI suggested that if a player's goal is to make it to the NHL, "why not do it through the college route where you're not only working towards your goal to make it to the NHL but at the same time you're getting yourself an education."

Discussion

The basis of our argument is that since the creation and maintenance of CHI, the recruitment landscape between the CHL and the NCAA has shifted to where the CHL has less competitive advantage over the NCAA. The six commissioners of the NCAA and CHI, on behalf of the NCAA schools, have been able to circumvent the NCAA's recruitment regulations. Strategically, CHI has used the discourse surrounding the offerings of and highlighting the successes of the NCAA schools and league to illustrate the NCAA route as a safety net for some of those 50,000 players who will never make it to the NHL. CHI has made it possible for NCAA schools to indirectly communicate with players at an earlier age and remain competitive with the CHL for the most talented young hockey players in North America.

This study began by posing two research questions: What forces, actions, and/or events contributed to the creation of CHI? What forces, actions, or events contributed to maintaining CHI's relevance in their attempt to

leverage NCAA Division I hockey with Canadian hockey players and parents? In this article, the findings —"Background on the Creation of CHI and Their Offerings" and "Initial Challenges Faced by CHI"— that address the first research question are discussed in two sections, which identify the legitimizing strategies being used by CHI. The findings that answer the second research question are discussed in four sections: "Educational Opportunities," "Student Life Experiences," "Player Development," and "Professional Hockey Opportunities."

To further understand these findings, we apply the theoretical construct of legitimacy and institutional work. More specifically, we examine these findings though a pragmatic legitimacy lens (i.e., exchange, influential, and dispositional legitimacy). The NCAA commissioners worked to create and maintain CHI using a strategy that promoted NCAA Division I hockey as a safety net for Canadian hockey players who were overlooked by the CHL franchises or who wish to continue competing at the elite level and receive an education.

Pragmatic Legitimacy

We begin this discussion by determining that the type of legitimacy that exists for CHI is pragmatic legitimacy. As Bitektine (2011) suggested, pragmatic legitimacy is determined through the overall value that is assessed by an evaluator. CHI focuses on strategically providing information about the NCAA that is of value to Canadian parents and players, who are the evaluators in the context of this study. This strategy apparently attempts to differentiate and illustrate the advantage of playing in an NCAA school versus the CHL. Through the information that CHI provides, the evaluators are able to gain an understanding of the NCAA offerings, and their decisions may be influenced as a result. Thus, initial creation of CHI would indicate that there was a lack of understanding by these evaluators as to the potential opportunities for competing for an NCAA Division I school. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the forces, actions, and/or events used by CHI can be examined according to Suchman's (1995) three categories of pragmatic legitimacy: exchange, influential, and dispositional legitimacy.

Exchange legitimacy. The central premise of exchange legitimacy is that the constituents and potential constituents support the organization's policies and actions, exchange occurs between the two parties, and through this exchange the organization is perceived as legitimate (Suchman, 1995). An example of exchange legitimacy is the role of CHI as an informational and marketing resource regarding *Educational Opportunities*. CHI frames playing in the NCAA as receiving a "world class" education (P5 and P10 of CHI; CHI, 2013a). An exchange occurs between the potential players and their parents (i.e., constituents); the player wants to play hockey and the parents want their child to get an education, so the NCAA route represents an exchange where both constituents can get what they want. The CHI, then, is the initial starting point for a discussion about the NCAA educational opportunities with parents and players whereas in the past that opportunity would not exist until the players were older. Representatives from the CHI then shape the recruitment message around educational opportunities that the NCAA provides. *Educational Opportunities* appears to be a valuable offering to parents and players and is emphasized in the recruitment message through CHI's hockey summits. Thus, exchange occurs also between constituents and CHI.

Influential legitimacy. This type of pragmatic legitimacy goes beyond the exchange between the players, parents, and CHI. With influential legitimacy, the organizations receive support from constituents because the organization's actions and policies are "responsive to their larger interests" (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Furthermore, "if the organization seeks influential legitimacy, it must also recruit cooptation targets who are credible to key constituents, yet who are unlikely to demand dramatic changes in organizational activities" (p. 589). For example, in the context of this study, influential legitimacy becomes apparent with regard to the strategy of *Professional Hockey Opportunities*. The NHL player testimonials on the CHI website provide an incentive to potential players and draw on the experiences of previous players; in addition, part of the legitimacy emanates from the fact that the testimonials are from high-profile NHL players who once played in the NCAA (e.g., Jonathan Toews, Martin St. Louis, Kyle Turris). In this case, support is exemplified as alumni being supportive of the league and using their profiles as professional athletes to initially maintain legitimacy for the NCAA Division I and assist in CHI's being created and maintained as an acceptable information resource.

Another example is the CHI suggestion that NCAA Division I schools offer more than hockey and *Educational Opportunities*; players and parents should also consider *Student Life Experiences* when determining whether to play in the CHL or the NCAA. The message presented by CHI draws attention to the potential friends, teammates, classmates, and even future spouses that a player will meet while attending an NCAA university or college (CHI, 2013h). As such, *Student Life Experiences* can make moving to a new town to play hockey and attend university or college an attractive prospect for young Canadian hockey players.

Dispositional legitimacy. The final type of pragmatic legitimacy was dispositional legitimacy, whereby "constituents are likely to accord legitimacy to those organizations that 'have our best interests at heart,' that 'share our values,' or that are 'honest,' 'trustworthy,' 'decent,' and 'wise'" (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Interestingly, the media discourse surrounding the initial emergence of CHI was framed as CHI and NCAA challenging the existing norms within the Canadian hockey system and, more importantly, the CHL's ability to recruit Canadian players. CHI's initial strategy to penetrate the market was to discredit the CHL and create an "us-versus-them" situation, as explained by P3 of the CHL. Paul Kelly

apparently attempted to establish dispositional legitimacy for CHI by creating trust and shared values (mostly with parents) through discrediting the CHL's motives, decisions, and handling of players. The phenomenon of discrediting a rival organization is a relatively new topic within the sport management literature.

We found that a change took place once dispositional legitimacy was established and institutional maintenance became a factor. CHI's information and strategies now place less emphasis on discrediting the CHL. The institution is maintained through *Educational Opportunities*, *Player Development*, *Student Life Experiences*, and *Professional Hockey Opportunities*, which connect the NCAA values and opportunities with the values of potential players and parents. For example, CHI framed the NCAA as "The Logical Path to the NHL" (CHI, 2013d) for Canadian players; this information is directed toward players who want to continue to compete at the elite level. Arguably, the endorsement message of education and scholarship opportunities is focused more toward parents. This strategy frames playing in the NCAA as a way of accommodating the values and needs of parents as well as players.

Institutional Work and Pragmatic Legitimacy

The basis of our argument is that CHI as an institution was created and maintained through pragmatic legitimacy. In the context of this empirical setting, the institutional arrangement (i.e., NCAA recruitment regulations) limits an NCAA coach's ability to recruit the top Canadian players and remain competitive with the CHL. The NCAA commissioners' approach allowed for the institutional arrangements to remain while minimizing the external threat of the CHL.

Similar to the theoretical frameworks of Lawrence (1999) and Zilber (2009), the commissioners' strategy has not been to challenge or reinforce the existing foundational elements of the institutional arrangements but rather to create and maintain an institution that frames the NCAA as a viable option for Canadian hockey players. Thus, the central premise of this study is that legitimacy, and more specifically pragmatic legitimacy (i.e., exchange, influential, and dispositional legitimacy), is a means through which institutional creation and maintenance (CHI) allows the NCAA Division I schools to circumvent the current institutional arrangements (i.e., recruiting and eligibility regulations) enforced by the NCAA and be perceived as a viable option for the most talented Canadian hockey players. In this way, value is created in the information provided by CHI to players and parents, which we identify as pragmatic legitimacy.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) noted that "the real mystery of institutions is how social structures can be made to be self-replicating and persist beyond the lifespan of their creators" (p. 234). It is only in the last 4 years that the Division I coaches have been able to adapt to the NCAA situation through the creation and maintenance of CHI, even though the field-level conditions had favored the CHL since the 1970s:

> As of August 1971, any student who had played in Canada's top junior leagues [i.e., CHL] would be considered a professional. . . . This legislation was designed to preserve the NCAA's strictly amateur code, but it also had the unintended effect of limiting another category of potential (and highly talented) Canadian recruits. (Holman, 2007, p. 463)

Up until 2010 the NCAA commissioners conformed to the institutional arrangements, and their doing so represented the strategic response of an organization operating within an institutional environment as a means of maintaining legitimacy (Oliver, 1991). The uniqueness about the current empirical setting is that the NCAA commissioners are still conforming; however, through the creation of CHI they have been able to circumvent some of the recruitment regulations.

Institutional creation is often the result of a threat to the current institutional arrangement. We find these threats within the field of sports when institutions (i.e., sport organizations) emerge to challenge existing and established organizations within the particular sport system and operate independently as entrepreneurs; the World Hockey Association (WHA) and the eXtreme Football League (XFL) were examples of such new institutions. In most cases, the new institution struggles to establish and maintain legitimacy but fails in the end. Suchman (1995) indicated that to achieve pragmatic legitimacy, "an organization must either meet the substantive needs of various audiences or offer decision-making access, or both" (p. 578). The WHA and XFL were unsuccessful in meeting the needs of their various audiences. CHI, however, has focused on meeting the needs of their audiences: Canadian potential players and their parents.

According to Micelotta and Washington (2013), previous research (e.g., Dacin, Munir, & Tracey, 2010; Quinn & Washington, 2009; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) has demonstrated that institutional stability is underpinned by a "combination of regulatory practices, e.g., policing, co-opting, educating, used by incumbents to reinforce their legitimacy and reproduce advantageous institutional arrangements" (p. 1140). Thus, these institutions need to engage in purposeful actions to respond to changes within the field (Quinn & Washington, 2009). The creation and maintenance of CHI becomes the change initiator within the field, as CHI is used to "restore" (Lok & de Rond, 2013) the institutional arrangements of NCAA Division I hockey. As Micelotta and Washington (2013) further pointed out, "maintenance is not a stable property of the institutional order and various forms of work may be necessary to ensure institutional continuity and stability" (p. 1138). Our findings support this statement, as the CHI recruitment strategies focus on multiple aspects of NCAA Division I hockey to maintain legitimacy to both parents and players and to compete with rival institutions operating within the environment.

Conclusions

Because CHL franchises and NCAA universities and colleges compete for the same pool of Canadian talent, the findings of this study are extremely important, as hockey is one of the more popular sports in North America. To compete with a powerful organization such as the CHL, the NCAA commissioners have created and endorsed CHI to be an informational resource for Canadian minor hockey players. Based on the findings, we can conclude that CHI was created and maintained through pragmatic legitimacy. The NCAA's stringent recruitment and eligibility regulations have constrained NCAA schools in terms of competing for elite Canadian hockey talent. To get around the rules, the NCAA Division I hockey commissioners created CHI. The strategies of the CHI were to present the NCAA as an equally likely path to the NHL, while at the same time providing a safety net for those players who are not drafted by a CHL franchise. These strategies are framed in a way that reflects the notion that the NCAA is a safety net that can provide the holistic development of a player, as opposed to focusing on just the elite player and getting that player to the NHL. As a result of these strategies, pragmatic legitimacy is maintained, allowing for the NCAA to remain competitive with the CHL.

Contributions and Future Research

This study makes a number of contributions to sport managers and the field of sport management and to institutional theory. The sport management literature is limited with regard to studies using institutional work and legitimacy. By exploring a growing area of institutional theory (institutional work), we are extending the previous sport institutional theory literature. Furthermore, a clear contribution of this study is the operationalization of pragmatic legitimacy as means to understand how institutional work functions. While legitimacy has been discussed by scholars in conjunction with institutional theory, there has been limited research that has in fact made the connection between institutional work and legitimacy. This is a contribution that this study makes to the broader management field and sport management. In addition the theoretical contribution of this study is twofold.

First, the limited discussion specifically focusing on institutional creation and the operationalization of this concept constitutes a fundamental gap within the institutional work literature. This empirical study shows that the creation of an institution, such as CHI, can be established within an organizational field through the use of pragmatic legitimacy. In the context of this study, institutional actors (i.e., CHI and NCAA commissioners) were able to work within the regulations to create an institution that is able to compete with a rival institution. This is an important contribution, as studying institutional work, as demonstrated through our research, is a way to explain and explore similar scenarios in general business, recreation, and sporting contexts where institutions are created. Furthermore, this perspective contributes to sport management theory by demonstrating the use of institutional work, so that scholars can examine the creation of an institution by another organization to maintain legitimacy and remain competitive in the recruitment of athletes within the environment where the organization operates (e.g., NCAA Division I schools).

Second, this study demonstrates the evolution from institutional creation to institutional maintenance. Although institutional creation is common within the sport industry (e.g., WHA, XFL), such institutions may fail to survive because they lack a sustainable strategy. The situation studied here is different, in that the affiliation with an established organization that has legitimacy is used to maintain an institution and to further the institutional arrangement that exists within the organizational field. Thus, this study's second theoretical contribution to the sport management literature is that institutional maintenance, through a third party, can be a means through which organizations maintain their competitive position within an organizational field monopolized by an established organization. As was also identified earlier in this study, previous literature that has used institutional work, particularly institutional maintenance, is limited in scope. As such, a contribution of this study is that the institutional maintenance is operationalized within an empirical setting and provides a basis for which to discuss institutional maintenance. However, further research is needed to explore the "de-evolution" of an institution to understand the complete evolutionary cycle within an organizational field of sport.

From a practical perspective, within any sport delivery system there are specific transitional points for athletes, and these points become critical for sport managers who are competing with other sport organizations to recruit the most talented athletes. These transitional points are also critical for athletes, as sport organizations at these points are the stepping-stones to becoming recognized and recruited by professional organizations (e.g., franchises of the National Football League, National Basketball Association, or Major League Baseball). Thus, our study findings suggest that the information conveyed by CHI can contribute to the attractiveness and recruitment success of the NCAA schools at a specific transition point for Canadian hockey players. In addition, the emergence of CHI and the competition for players that exists between the CHL and NCAA could potentially result in a decrease in the age at which players are being contacted. Future research can further investigate the following questions: Why was CHI allowed to operate on behalf of the NCAA Division I schools, and why was this successful? If the age of the player being contacted continues to decrease, what impact does that have on the hockey development system?

The unique aspect of this study is that CHI was created by the NCAA commissioners as a new institution to circumvent the NCAA's recruitment regulations, which

had been designed primarily for the sports of basketball and football. We found that in highly regulated environments sport managers can use legitimacy, specifically pragmatic legitimacy, to create and maintain an institution. While many options existed for these commissioners, such as developing new rules, regulations, or practices, outsourcing an information arm to recruit Canadian players was the action of choice. This brings up a number of questions that can be addressed in future research: How effective is the use of a third party for recruitment? Are there third parties for recruiting athletes in other sports (e.g., baseball, basketball) that are essentially controlled by the leagues? What is the consequence of using third parties as a recruitment tool in an amateur sport setting?

The importance of this study is that it highlights the viable options that are available for prospective Canadian players and parents. While we agree that the CHL and NCAA are not going anywhere anytime soon, there is a challenge for NCAA schools with respect to being perceived as a viable option for the most talented Canadian players to reach the NHL. Management of these NCAA schools needs to be cognizant of the potential outcomes if a change occurs—for example, if the CHL adapts to the CHI and NCAA strategies by changing their own approach to recruiting. Thus, we suggest that sport managers must always be aware of the threats and opportunities that exist within the environment and be able to manage their legitimacy in the face of competition for athletes by rival institutions.

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