

Gender Politics in US College Athletic Departments

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The Case of the University of Minnesota Merger

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PREFACE

LISA

In 2004, when this research project first started the main interest was to examine the management and leadership challenges of the premerger and merger stages of Minnesota's two athletic departments. I was relatively new to the University of Minnesota and I held an assistant professor of sport management position in the School of Kinesiology. I thought researching this unique case study about radical organizational change in the context of intercollegiate athletics would provide a contribution to the literature. The corporate organizational merger literature indicated 66% of mergers were unsuccessful because of incompatible cultures, poor communication, and poor management and leadership practices (Marks & Mirvis, 2010; Schweiger, 2002). In contrast, from the outside looking in, Minnesota's merger appeared to be working. Or perhaps in reality, the athletic department merger had no other option but to function and be successful. Dissolving a Division I athletic department was not a realistic option in this context and thus the merger had to work. To gain access to the organization, I met with the newly hired athletic director (AD), Joel Maturi (who was two years into his term). I shared my research plan, the reason why I wanted to conduct the study, as well as requesting access to complete the research. Joel was gracious enough to grant access. Interviews with different athletic department stakeholders (i.e., University administrators, athletic department administrators, coaches, staff, student athletes, and faculty) were subsequently scheduled and conducted over a one-year period. Joel Maturi also assisted in the recruitment of Boosters

by sending an email outlining the study and explaining that individuals who wanted to participate in a one-on-one interview should contact me.

After several interviews with participants, where they were asked questions about the history leading up to the merger, why the merger occurred, and what were some of the challenges people observed and/or experienced in the pre-merger and merger process (see the Methodological Appendix), it became quite clear that this story was about gender politics and organizational change. The social processes (e.g., formal and informal practices, interactions, and narratives) involved in this merger were typical of most corporate mergers, however, the gender politics motivated through gendered organizational relationships was atypical. In comparison with corporate combinations, merging organizations in sport we argue provides a unique opportunity to engage in a detailed analysis of the gender politics involved in the various social processes when gender affiliated organizations merge. The histories of the two departments and their relationships had created very separate and distinct cultures that were valued by their respective stakeholders and supporters. However, the distinct cultures, organizational actors, and histories had produced for some an “us vs them” mentality, much distrust, and gender politically charged organizational change processes during the merger. Of note, one example of the distrust was displayed toward me during an interview when I was asked by one of the participants if I was working for the athletic department/University. Some athletic department stakeholders believed I was working for administration and therefore suspicious of my activities. Ha! I laughed to myself because I was thinking how this rumor was so far from the truth. I was focused on learning about managing and leading through organizational change. At that time, I had no idea of the gendered political nature of this case.

VICKI

My involvement with this project began in 2008 as doctoral student at the University of Minnesota when Lisa first presented the merger project to me. At that time, she was examining leadership in the context of a merger, and she invited me to be a co-author on two manuscripts that were eventually published in *European Sport Management Quarterly* (with co-author, Sarah Leberman) and *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*. Shortly after that it became clear that there was much more to the story

of the Minnesota merger, and Lisa began discussing the gender politics of the case and how Sally was interested in working with us on the project. My research interests were in leadership and gendered social processes in sport, so it was an obvious decision as I found myself in the right place at the right time.

Once we began working on the two articles focusing on the gendered social processes in the merger, it became clear that there was a lot of material to cover—too much for two manuscripts. We were brainstorming ways we could include more when we were presented with the opportunity to work on the book with Palgrave.

SALLY

My involvement in the project started when Lisa contacted me in 2009. She told me that she was undertaking the merger project and had begun to realize that there was a lot more than just the mechanics of a merger playing out. She asked if I could help with the gendered context of the merger as she recognized that understanding it would help us gain a better understanding of how history and events leading up to a merger, stakeholders' reactions, identifying what political processes can occur during and after the merging of gender-affiliated sport organizations, and how these political processes can be gendered. I was delighted to be asked given my research interest in gender relations in sport organizations that goes back to the late 1990s. Lisa also told me that she would be asking Vicki to become involved, given that her PhD also focused on gendered organizational processes. At first, we focused on writing two articles: one for the *Journal of Sport Management* and the second for *Gender & Society*,¹ both of which are referenced in this book. Subsequent to the publication of the *Gender & Society* article we received an invitation from Palgrave (publishers of *Gender & Society*) to write a book about the merger.

Consequently, we realized that the focus of the study needed expanding from investigating the premerger and merger stages of the two athletic departments to include an in-depth examination of the history and culture of the two departments and a ten-year reflection post-merger. Post-merger reflections are rare in the literature and this book provides important insights into understanding the long-term implications of gender political organizational change. Slowly, and with some trepidation, we moved along the path to creating this book.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 62 athletic department stakeholders (see Table 1) who had first-hand experience with the merger process, which included the following informants: athletic department administrators ($n=12$), athletic unit directors ($n=2$), coaches ($n=10$), athletic department staff ($n=10$), student athletes ($n=3$), faculty ($n=3$), athletic boosters ($n=20$), and central university administrators ($n=3$). The richness of the data we collected would not have existed without the willingness of these individuals who participated in this study.²

Table 1 Breakdown of participant interviewees' role, gender, and sport

<i>Role</i>	<i>Interviews 2004–2005</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Sport</i>	<i>Interviews 2013–2014</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Sport</i>
Central university administrators	3	Male ($n=0$) Female ($n=3$)				
Athletic department administrators	10	Males ($n=6$) Females ($n=4$)		5	Male ($n=3$) Female ($n=2$)	
Athletic unit directors ³	2	Male ($n=1$) Female ($n=1$)				
Athletic department staff	9	Male ($n=5$) Female ($n=4$)		1	Female ($n=1$)	
Coaches	9	Male ($n=4$) Female ($n=5$)	Revenue ($n=1$) Non-revenue ($n=8$)	4	Male ($n=3$) Female ($n=1$)	Non-revenue ($n=4$)
Student athletes	3	Male ($n=1$) Female ($n=2$)	Non-revenue ($n=3$)			
Boosters	18	Male ($n=9$) Female ($n=9$)		6	Male ($n=2$) Female ($n=4$)	
Faculty	3	Male ($n=2$) Female ($n=1$)				
Total	57			16		

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected in two stages. First, from 2004 to 2005, to gain an understanding of the transition and integration stages, and second from 2013 to 2014 to learn about stakeholders' perceptions post-merger.⁴ Multiple sources of data were sought, and the primary data source was in-depth audio recorded interviews. In the 2004–2005 interviews participants were asked general demographic questions (i.e., role and responsibilities during the transition and integration stages and years worked in separate and combined departments), to describe the series of events that occurred during the transition and integration stages of the merger, people's reaction to the merger, the culture of the two athletic departments pre-merger and post-merger, how their position/role had changed or evolved, how various stakeholders' interests and values were taken into consideration during organization restructuring, and to identify the challenges experienced and/or observed during the two merger stages. In the 2013–2014 interviews participants were asked to reflect over the past ten years and describe what the merger meant to them, to describe the current culture of the athletics department, to what extent they thought earlier fears of the merger played out, whether there were any positive and/or negative outcomes from the merger that people did not foresee, and what they had learned from the experience. The interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes.

Secondary data in the form of over 200 archival documents (e.g., institutional meeting minutes, institutional reports, institutional internal memos, electronic correspondence, and athletic department promotional materials) and news media were collected to gain background information about the history of Minnesota intercollegiate athletics, understanding institutional culture, relationships, rationale for the merger, stakeholder reactions to the merger, the merger process, and cultural changes. Secondary data were also collected through participant observation by the lead and second author.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed a multiple-step process. Interview data were first transcribed verbatim and all data were read and re-read and key events and experiences identified. The data from the first data collection period were analyzed by Lisa and Vicki. Sally took the lead on analyzing the second

data set in 2014. Data were next openly coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify the various events in terms of the premerger history and during the merger process, and to examine the nature of the gender politics in the social processes of the transition, integration, and post-merger stages. The open coding processes led to category development where their respective properties and dimensions were delineated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Category development involved comparing incidents and accounts with both the interview transcripts and the archival documents until a point of saturation was reached and no new properties, dimensions, consequences, conditions or actions were evident in the data. Axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was next performed to examine relationships between categories and subcategories, and to identify themes. For example, the category integration stage and the relevant subcategories reorganization of work and structural changes were assessed to ascertain the link to gender politics. Respondents' perceptions of the gender politics in relation to the merger stages were also compared and contrasted, along with comparing archival document accounts of the gender politics with the interview transcripts.

BOOK OUTLINE

The chapters of this book provide an in-depth analysis of the nuanced gendered political processes within this radical change event. Chapter 1, "Introduction and Conceptual Framework," outlines the historical context for the book. Drawing on historical documents, interviews, and media, we illustrate the history of gender segregated athletic departments in the United States and sport organizations internationally. The social and political pressures that led to their amalgamation (Title IX in the USA and neoliberal forces internationally) are outlined. Second, we provide an overview of the conceptual framework, which draws together the gender, organizational politics, and merger literature.

Chapter 2, "Ms and M," describes the case of the Minnesota athletic department merger. We present the pre-merger conditions, specifically, the two athletic department cultures and their gendered characteristics. We also describe relationships between key actors and key organizational structures and processes.

Chapter 3, "To Merge or Not to Merge: That Is the Question!," presents the transaction stage of the merger and outlines the background

regarding the University's decision to merge. We also present and analyze the deliberations regarding the strengths and limitations of merging the two departments. In these discussions, we highlight the politicking of organizational stakeholders who either supported or opposed the merger.

Chapter 4, "Minnesota's Merger Syndrome," examines the transition stage and discusses stakeholders' emotional reactions to the merger. These emotional reactions are outlined in terms of a fear of loss (a loss of equity, a loss of identity, a loss of status, and a loss of autonomy). The political maneuvering by both men's and women's stakeholders to secure their status post-merger is also explored. The last section examines the gendered political processes involved in the search for a new athletic director who was assigned the task of leading the merger.

Chapter 5, "The Rubber Hits the Road!," describes the newly hired athletic director's efforts to combine the two departments. During the integration process he sought to assess trust and loyalties, restructure the department, and re-engineer the organization's culture. His efforts were hindered, in part by the merger politics. The chapter concludes with a discussion of these challenges in the context of the merger and the broader organizational change, gender processes, and organizational politics literature.

Chapter 6, "We are Minnesota!," includes a reflection of the last ten years post-merger. The chapter is organized into three sections. First, we discuss stakeholders' reflections post-merger. In particular, this discussion will consider what challenges they feared and which fears actually occurred. We explain and discuss why certain expected challenges did not manifest. Second, stakeholders' reflections about the current merged department and what it represents are presented. Last, we present concluding remarks about the organizational change as a gendered political process.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for this book include researchers and practitioners seeking to reflect on gendered, political organizational change processes by using an integrated framework of gendered social processes (Acker, 1990; Britton & Logan, 2008; Ely & Meyerson, 2000), gendered organizational politics (Davey, 2008), and merger stages (Schweiger, 2002).

In particular, the target audience includes upper-level undergraduate and post graduate students, interested academic and independent researchers, and individuals interested in the University of Minnesota athletic department and its history. Our intention is to provide broader practical implications and theoretical contributions relating to the nuances of organizational change as a highly complex, political, gendered relational process.

NOTES

1. Schull, V., Shaw, S., & Kihl, L. A. (2013). If a woman came in ... She would have been eaten up alive: Analyzing gendered political processes in the search for an athletic director. *Gender & Society*, 27(1), 56–81. Currently, *Gender & Society* is a highly ranked journal in women studies and sociology.
2. See Methodological Appendix explaining the procedures for maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants.
3. Unit directors were those individuals that oversaw departments that reported to the University provost office and had an indirect reporting line to athletics.
4. Ten of the interviews conducted in 2013–14 were from individuals that participated in 2004–2005. Six interviews conducted in 2013–14 were from individuals that did not participate in 2004–2005.

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Finally, we would like to thank Joel Maturi for allowing us to conduct this amazing case study. We truly appreciate your honesty, integrity, and support of this project.

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