

S1 00:03 [music] Welcome to the Sports Medicine Podcast brought to you by the Sydney and J.L. Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance in the Department of Health and Kinesiology at Texas A&M University. At the Huffines Institute, we're always working to facilitate, apply, and bring you the most up-to-date coverage of the wide world that is sports medicine and human performance, all in a language you can understand and share with your friends. And now, here's our host, the director of the Huffines Institute, Dr. Tim Lightfoot.

S2 00:33 Hello, and welcome to the weekly podcast from the Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance. I'm your host, Tim Lightfoot, and I'm so grateful that you took the time to download and that you're listening to us today. We have another great podcast for you as we have been working towards in our series the stories behind the studies series. It is my firm belief that there is a untold story behind every scientific study that's out there. If you talk to scientists that have done a lot of research, they will always tell you these wonderful stories about how studies actually got done or the memorable things about them. And today to share with us a story behind a study, we welcome back to the podcast Dr. George Cunningham. Welcome back to the podcast, George.

S3 01:17 Thanks for having me.

S2 01:18 Yeah. So long-time listeners will remember that Dr. Cunningham was with us March 29th of 2013. That was episode 104 for those of you that are counting, and so we're glad to have Dr. Cunningham back. There's been a lot of things have happened in Dr. Cunningham's life over the last four years, so I'm going to remind them of who you are, George.

S3 01:38 That's good. They'll need that [laughter].

S2 01:43 George is a full professor in our sports management division here. Actually, since the time we last had him on the podcast, he has been an associate dean for academic affairs and research here in the college. He recently stepped out of that role. Unlike most people, administration did not slow his research pace. If anything, it may have accelerated it. At this point, at least the latest tally that I have, he has published 167 scientific articles, 5 books, and 19 book chapters. He works generally in the area of diversity of sport. And so today we're going to lead off, George, with a question as what was the most-- if you think about all the studies that you've done, and you've published 167 of those things, which one pops out to you as the most memorable?

S3 02:31 When I started thinking about this, the things that popped into my head first were the ones that were not published, but quickly rejected. But I figured that would be less enticing to people, so then I--

S2 02:42 Well, let's explore that for just a second. Why did those studies come to mind?

S3 02:47 Well, part of it is that-- my experience at least, is that if I've had 167 times that an editor said, "Congratulations. Your paper's been accepted," I've at least that many thanks, but no thanks letters. And so some of those were really quick [laughter]. Thanks, but no thanks letters.

S2 03:09 Within three hours of you turning it in, they get an email back.

S3 03:12 Yes. You spend a year plus collecting the data and months working on the paper and then nothing. But you make corrections based on what they recommend and send it elsewhere, and it finds a home, usually.

S2 03:25 Yeah, that's what we say. All studies have a home some place.

S3 03:28 They do.

S2 03:28 So before we move away from this, I don't think your experience is unique, and I'm not sure the public understands how much, to some extent, rejection that scientists deal with--

S3 03:40 A lot.

S2 03:40 --especially with their studies.

S3 03:42 Yeah. And I think students don't either, for some reason. But they quickly learn. But then they get down and a little dejected, and I mean, it's just part of it. I'm an editor now as well, and 9 out of 10 letters that I write are the thanks, but no thanks, and that's kind of a tough thing to write. But the good part is that you can help people along with their papers, too. And so the 10 or 15 percent that get in and are hopefully pretty good papers.

S2 04:14 And that's a pretty average acceptance rate for a top-line scientific journal, is 10 to 20 percent.

S3 04:21 Yes.

S2 04:21 Which means that 80 to 90 percent of articles that are submitted are rejected.

S3 04:27 Isn't that depressing [laughter]?

S2 04:29 Well, yes, for those of us that experience that rejection, as you said, yes, it is depressing. But I hope it helps the public understand that this is not one of those deals where you write a paper and send it in and it's automatically published. Sometimes I get the impression the media thinks that we do a study and it's automatically going to be printed someplace, and that's not the case.

S3 04:49 I wish.

S2 04:50 Yeah, would be nice if that was the case [laughter].

S3 04:51 Make my life easier. But the ones that probably I remember that were published-- I guess there was one in particular that resulted from a number of things that we had done in the past. And then, because of that one, it helped us springboard to a number of other publications and ways to expand the area of diversity inclusion that hadn't been looked at before, and that have made, I think, a pretty good impact. But we can trace it back to one, I suppose.

S2 05:24 So tell us about that one.

S3 05:26 So I'm going to--

S2 05:27 So what was that one about? I mean, set us up.

S3 05:29 Okay. So the one was looking at NCAA athletic departments. And a lot of people in the past had written that diversity will lead to whatever outcome. So better employment or better employees that you can attract and keep in your organization, more creativity, etc. What we did was look at objective measures of performance which, I think, has a little bit stronger sway with administrators.

S2 06:03 Now, we're not talking about athletic performance. We're talking about administrative performance, or--?

S3 06:07 Well, so there's different organizations, but the-- they've called it different things over the years, but it's basically measure of championships that the athletic department has won over the year, and you get credit for--

S2 06:20 Okay. So it is tied to the athletic performances.

S3 06:22 Yes.

S2 06:23 Yeah? Okay. Okay.

S3 06:23 Because that's really the end goal. I mean, you make money. You provide entertainment. But it's athletic performance for these athletic departments. And so we looked at the diversity of the department, but also the strategies that they used to create an inclusive culture. And it was those two, and the interaction between the two, that really led to performance. It wasn't just diversity. It wasn't just inclusion. But when you had both, that you far outperform your peers.

S2 06:50 So you had to have the strategy plus you had to have the diversity as well.

S3 06:54 Yes.

S2 06:54 Okay. What made that memorable? You kind of, I think, maybe mentioned it, that this was one of the first times that this had been objectively measured.

S3 07:03 Yeah. So I'll scoot back a little bit on it, that--

S2 07:07 Yeah. We like historical context. That's good. Yeah.

S3 07:09 That's good [laughter] because you're going to get a little bit. So I think that was published in '09. And so around '05, our lab had started awarding the Diversity in Athletics Award. And we would collect questionnaire and archival data from every athletic department in the US. And then--

S2 07:31 Every athletic department?

S3 07:33 Yes.

S2 07:33 All divisions?

S3 07:34 It was a lot.

S2 07:35 Okay. Yeah.

S3 07:35 And then provide awards to them. And then we would try to publicize that, not only to show, "Here are the good things in diversity that these places are doing," but also, "Hey, look, Texas A&M is interested in this, and we have a lab that studies this, and etc." I have no idea how they came on it. But USA Today found the release that we had and published very brief little article about it. That then led to NCAA representatives contacting us to see how we could expand that and us working with the NCAA to expand the award and then to develop a best practices manual for all administrators. So we had a multi-year contract with the NCAA, had a number of quantitative data, or a lot of quantitative data, and then interviewed for the best practices manual five athletic departments around the country that had consistently done well. So we interviewed university administrators, athletic administrators, coaches, athletes. 80-plus people developed the guide. It was distributed to every athletic director, and I believe, senior associate athletic director and SWA in the country.

S3 08:58 We then presented to the leadership at the NCAA and they also invited Harry Edwards who you may know as a leader in diversity in the country. And he responded to our study, which was interesting [laughter]. And then it led to a series of publications, but the '09 one was probably the first one to come out of these data, the one that I just described. And what was nice about that is then-president Miles Brand wrote an op-ed in Huffington Post about here's why we care about diversity, in reference to our

work, in support of it. So not only did it then lead to other papers, but the chance to really at least have the opportunity to talk with administrators who were in charge of this and to have the findings distributed to 1,000-plus people and for the op-ed piece to be written by the president of the NCAA. It had some good coverage.

- S2 10:03 It impresses me that this is one situation where you can say your science actually did have an impact.
- S3 10:10 Yes.
- S2 10:11 So often we publish our work and we don't know really how much of an impact it has.
- S3 10:15 Exactly.
- S2 10:15 But in this case, through this chain of events, you knew that you were having an impact on what was happening in that case.
- S3 10:21 Yes, and we've been-- after that then people would call our lab to say, "Hey, well, why isn't this working or why isn't that working," so we'd go and visit their department and provide a report for them.
- S2 10:35 Now, in this case, and maybe I should've asked this earlier, but just so we're clear about-- when you talk about diversity in athletic departments, what aspects of diversity are you talking about, in general at that time in 2009?
- S3 10:45 Yeah. So in '09, we were focusing on race and there's-- the paper, in particular, focused on race. The award focused on race, and sex, and compliance with Title IX, and support for women's and men's athletics through scholarships, participation, etc. So it was mostly demographic characteristics. And we've since then had the opportunity to expand to sexual orientation and gender identity and found the exact same pattern of results. And we followed a similar step or process in looking at the organizations that were doing really good work in that area, and were able to publish a number of articles related to the case studies that we conducted. And again, people have used that and-- which has been good.
- S2 11:43 On first blush, people may not realize the association between sports management, which is in the division you're in, and diversity in sport. So will you help tie that together for the audience a little bit?
- S3 11:53 Sure. So sport management's concerned with anything related to the management, marketing, or governance of sport. And from our perspective, diversity influences all three of those. It's probably most related in the discussions that we've had to the management of sport, so who do you have in your organization? What sort of access do you provide? What are their experiences, etc.? Those are all managerial implications or managerial activities.
- S2 12:20 And again, you're not specifically talking about athletes themselves. You're talking about the people that are running the show kind of thing, yeah.
- S3 12:26 Correct, yes. So your coaches, your game day operations people, your marketers and sponsorship people, and everybody in between.
- S2 12:35 It would seem this took a - and you kind of mentioned this - a whole heck of a lot of work to kind of gather all this information. Were you doing this by yourself? Did you have a team? Is this like you did this at night when you had nothing else to do [laughter]?
- S3 12:49 It was pre-Netflix, so a lot more time on my hands [laughter]. Yeah, so we had some GAs and then I remember the college had a student worker program. I think they still have it now. But the student worker was helpful in some of the grunt work that's

needed, and there's a lot of archival data. Now it's a heck of a lot easier. So the Department of Ed publishes data on every athletic department, and you can just Google equity in athletics and you'll find it. Used to, you had to go through each page and input the data by hand into your Excel file. So you learn, one, how to use the 10-key function on your computer, but also you kind of realize how nice it is now that they have a downloadable file, Excel file, that's mammoth, but it's nice to have because you--

S2 13:49 It's already done.

S3 13:50 It's already done.

S2 13:51 Yeah. How many athletic departments are there in the country? Just off the top of your head.

S3 13:55 A thousandish.

S2 13:56 A thousandish.

S3 13:57 Yeah.

S2 13:58 So that helps the audience get another perspective on the mammoth-ness of this--

S3 14:03 Yes. It was a lot.

S2 14:03 --data project, yeah.

S3 14:04 And one time I remember this student worker-- so you have to code everything because we'd send out pre-notification to let them know a survey was coming. And then a survey packet with the letter explaining the purpose of this study and the survey in a return envelope. And then a reminder to complete it. And then another survey packet for those who didn't fill it out. So you have to code all that to know who's responding, who's not. And the student worker had messed up part of the coding. That took some doing to figure out where he messed it up, but we fixed it, so [laughter].

S3 14:40 Untangle all that stuff, yeah.

S2 14:41 Yes.

S3 14:42 Well, George, thank you for being with us today.

S2 14:44 Yeah, thank you.

S3 14:45 Yeah, well, we're glad to share these stories behind the studies, and you will-- for the audience, listening audience, we will have this article up on our website that we'll be linking to. So if you want to read the article and see what it turned out, at least now you know the story behind it and you can read the article. And see kind of a little bit more about the science behind the things that we do, actually. So again, George, thank you for being with us today.

S3 15:09 Thank you. I appreciate it.

S2 15:10 And I want to thank all of you for taking the time to download and listen to us. We hope that you join us next week when we have another interesting person from the world of sports medicine and human performance. I have a feeling that we will have another story behind the study next week as well. And so join us for that. Shoot us an email if you like this approach at huffines@tamu.edu. Until next week, we hope that you stay active and healthy. [music]

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