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Diversity Hiring Is Right, Smart

There will be more head coaches of color at NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision schools than ever in history when the 2009 season gets underway. And more were hired than ever before at the end of the 2008 season. Since 2005, the number has increased by 300 percent.

I'm encouraged, but I'm sure not ready to declare victory.

At one point last fall after firings in a number of programs, there were only three. After two or three years of scratching out hires that increased the number by one or two a year, it looked like intercollegiate football was suddenly losing ground rapidly in its efforts at being as diverse in its coaching ranks as it is with student-athletes.

Then came a string of new hires that pushed the number to an all-time high.

Encouraging, but here is why this remains the single most frustrating problem I've faced over the last six years. Even when you throw in the two African-American "coaches in waiting" that the Universities of Maryland and Kentucky have already named, there still are only 11 head coaches of color among the 119 FBS schools.

This at a time when 47 percent of all FBS student-athletes are African-American. This at a time when 36 percent of all Division I basketball coaches are African-American. This at a time when African-American coaches have won two of the last three Super Bowls.

My predecessor at the NCAA, Ced Dempsey, was just as frustrated and spoke out about it as often as I have. His predecessor, Dick Schultz, had also called for more diversity in the coaching ranks. That's more than 15 years ago.

Why is it taking so long to make progress, to get above numbers that cannot be virtually wiped out at the end of a single season if a small handful of coaches are dismissed?

One of those NFL head coaches of color with a Super Bowl victory - Tony Dungy, who retired at the end of the 2008 season - wonders the same thing. He talked to *New York Times* columnist Bill Rhoden recently about his interest in helping "break down big-time college football's resistance to hiring African-American head coaches."

Dungy told Rhoden, "The baffling thing for me is that you can have African-American professors at these schools, you can be the head of the department, you can be the basketball coach, you can be the track coach, but you can't be the football coach. How are we going to change that? I don't know."

It is seriously comforting to have an individual like Tony Dungy involved and helping to lead a charge for change. His credibility, success and personal integrity will make a difference. If there is one person who might bring the necessary impetus for lasting change with this issue, Tony could very well be that person.

At the end of the day, the solution will be a simple one.

There are those who believe the solution is for higher education to adopt “the Rooney Rule” that requires NFL teams to include at least one African-American among its candidates to be interviewed. Putting that in place for 32 teams among owners in one sport is a lot easier than getting a thousand colleges and university presidents to agree to a process that potentially could affect more than two dozen sports.

But even if you could put an intercollegiate athletics version of the Rooney Rule in place, it likely would not achieve the kind of change that is needed and would therefore be disingenuous to candidates who were being interviewed only to meet the requirements of the rule. Over the last couple of years, more than 30 percent of all final interviews for head coaching spots have been with minority candidates. And it still hasn’t resulted in significantly greater hires.

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Arguments for this approach have wasted a lot of energy and distracted from the real problem.

There are those who believe litigation is the solution. Title VII, a federal civil rights mandate designed to eliminate discrimination in hiring, already requires higher education to open its doors to candidates regardless of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. If they fail to do so, courts are the avenue to change.

I hope it doesn’t come to a court case, but it might do so. I hope higher education becomes enlightened on its own before it is forced to do so.

Still others believe legislation will solve the problem. In fact, representatives in Oregon have introduced a bill that would require all institutions to include a minority candidate in the process for filling head football coaching positions at any Division I institution in the state. That appears to be a long shot that would eventually require every state to adopt a similar law if this solution is to work on a national basis.

I’m not convinced any of these approaches will work. The solution is a simple one.

We must come to understand that hiring head coaches of color in college football is a pathway to success. Diversity and inclusion are the ingredients for achieving excellence in all things, including athletics.

Dr. George Cunningham, director of the Laboratory for Diversity in Sport at Texas A&M University, recently completed a comparative study of those programs that earn the most points

in the NACDA Learfield Sports Director's Cup competition with those who also score high in the Diversity in Athletics Award competition. Specifically, he was looking to see how an athletics department's diversity strategy might help predict Director's Cup performance.

His conclusion was that programs with proactive diversity management strategies and a racially diverse workforce earned more points. Diversity made a difference.

The business world has understood this for a long time because of its single-minded approach to market competitiveness and survival. It's a simple solution. Not only is hiring for diversity, including head football coaches, the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do.