

LSU: Applying Legitimacy Work Within the Women's Basketball Program

Kayla Martinez, University of Louisville

Keisha Branch, University of Louisville

Marcis Fennell, University of Louisville

Abstract

It is undeniable that the landscape of college athletics has changed drastically just in the past three years alone due to the approval of Name, Image Likeness (NIL) legislations and the newly adopted transfer portal rules. Women's basketball is one sport that has truly felt the impact of these institutional changes, with it bringing in 12.9% of all NCAA NIL compensation (Balasaygun, 2022), making up 39% of the top 100 NIL female earners (On3NIL Tracker, 2024), and ranking second in transfers out of all sports (Elbada, 2022). The Louisiana State University (LSU) women's basketball program has embodied these changes and serves as an interesting case to explore the effects of NIL and the transfer portal. In the 2022-2023 season, LSU went on to become National Champions with a roster made up of nine transfers and now in the 2023-2024 season has three players- Angel Reese, Flau'Jae Johnson, and Hailey Van Lith, who are ranked in the top ten for highest grossing NIL deals (Walsh, 2023). Additionally, throughout this year's season LSU's program has dealt with numerous circumstances on and off the court connected to this new terrain of NIL and transfer portal. For instance, unprecedented levels of celebrity, internal team drama, divergence of team matter, and media narratives have plagued the LSU basketball program. Although these situations can be cited throughout history in college athletics, the impact of NIL and the transfer portal, and the context of a prominent women's program are nuances that call for further exploration. LSU's season thus far has brought attention to potential fallout that could continue to happen as college athletes continue to have the opportunity to take advantage of NIL and the transfer portal. Considering both are new variables in college athletics, and having had significant impact in women's sport, LSU is shaping in the initial evaluation and perception of how to operate in this space. Legitimacy work focuses on the intentional actions organization and actors partake in to shape the evaluation and perception of an organization as favorable. In doing so it informs the interpretive process of making sense of narratives pertaining to institutional change (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Landau et al., 2014). With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to explore how actors within LSU's women's basketball program engage in legitimacy work to legitimize their actions in this new age of college athletics as proper and appropriate. A case study approach will be adopted to investigate an in-depth, holistic perspective of LSU's organizational process (Yin, 2018). Media artifacts such as interviews, social media posts and sport media articles will be analyzed to examine how different actors are contributing to the establishment of proper and appropriate actions. Specifically, this study will explore how NIL and the transfer portal impacts women's athletic programs and the way in which actors within these organizations have navigated this influence. Furthermore, this study can provide insight to the interaction between actors as they make sense of their place within organizations.