

Stakeholder management in big-time college sport: The African-American male athlete and the Interest-Convergence principle

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Abstract 123**

Since the writing of Freeman's (1984) landmark book, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, organizational theorists and management scholars have discussed and debated the stakeholder perspective and its relationship to the study of strategic management within organizations (see, for example, Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson, 1999; Freeman, 1999; Frooman, 1999; Giogia, 1999; Harrison & Freeman, 1999; Jones, 1995; Jones & Wicks, 1999; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Trevino & Weaver, 1999). Essentially, the stakeholder perspective is an organizational construct that focuses on the cooperative and competitive interests of multiple stakeholders of an organization, and the impact that management decisions have on these various stakeholder groups. A central purpose of the stakeholder approach has been to enable managers to understand stakeholders and strategically manage them (Frooman, 1999).

Chelladurai (2001) contended, "An important component of effective stakeholder management is to gain a clear understanding of stakeholder perceptions and preferences" (p. 87). Within the past ten years, sport management scholars have studied the values and preferences of specific stakeholder groups in the context of big-time college sport (e.g., Putler & Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe and Putler, 2002; Trail & Chelladurai, 2000). Putler and Wolfe (1999) suggested that those who are responsible for the management of big-time college sport must be sensitive to the priorities of important stakeholders. This is especially true given the tremendous growth and commercialization of college sport over the past few decades, and the subsequent focus by many stakeholder groups on reform efforts in big-time college sport (e.g., Knight Commission, 2001). Today, there are several primary and secondary stakeholder groups who can affect and are affected by the organizational activity of these big-time college sport programs; and therefore, it is important for those who manage the college sport enterprise to be mindful of this as they reflect upon the sometimes competing interests and varying agendas of their multiple constituencies. Moreover, they must be willing to critically assess the impact that their decision-making has on their stakeholders, and perhaps, seek alternative ways of understanding and addressing the interests of these important stakeholders.

The purpose of this paper presentation is to draw on some of the stakeholder theory literature as well as elements of the critical race theory framework in efforts to provide managers of college sport with an alternative conceptual tool for understanding and addressing some of the stakeholder management issues pertaining to the African American male athlete in the highly commercialized, "revenue-generating" sports of football and basketball at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE). In particular, critical race theory pioneer, Derrick Bell's interest-convergence principal (Bell, 1980; 2004)-which asserts that the interests of African Americans in achieving racial equality have been accommodated only when they have converged with the interests of powerful whites-will be utilized to demonstrate how white power brokers in college sport have been willing to sacrifice the well-being of the African American male athlete for their economic self-interests and that the continued exploitation and subordination of African Americans is sustained by those structural arrangements that promote white privilege.

Although there certainly are several primary stakeholder groups that have a stake or vested interest in the mission, purpose, and activity of these big-time college sport programs (e.g., coaches, administrators, athletic academic support personnel), our concern here is with the interests of African American male athletes in particular, and the role that sport administrators play in managing this stakeholder group's interests. The reason for the emphasis on African American male athletes is twofold. First, leadership at PWIHE and within their athletic programs were reluctant (despite legislation in opposition to segregation) to provide these athletes with the opportunity to participate in their athletic programs until they realized (in the 1960s) that excluding them from football and basketball went against their financial interests (Sage, 2007). That is, they soon acknowledged that the key to being competitive and winning conference and national championships in these sports, and thus, gaining media attention and corporate sponsors was to recruit many of these talented African American athletes to play for their teams. This would suggest that the initial profit and success motivation that guided these administrators' (and coaches) decisions to include African American athletes should not be ignored (Brooks & Kim, 2007). Second, since their arrival on these campuses at these PWIHE African American male athletes have, in some cases, gone on to have successful athletic and academic careers, and to achieve success as professional athletes. However, in far too many cases, these athletes have been victims of economic and academic exploitation (Benson, 2000; Brooks & Kim, 2007; Hawkins, 1999; Scales, 1990; Shropshire, 2000). It has been argued that the interests (i.e., academic achievement, graduation rates) of this extremely important stakeholder group have taken a back seat to the interests of other stakeholders (e.g., coaches, administrators, boosters and alumni). Brooks and Althouse's important books (2007; 2000; 1993) have discussed issues pertaining to racism and the experiences of African American athletes at PWIHE.

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This presentation will briefly highlight some of the relevant literature on stakeholder theory, and situate it within the context of college sport. Then, it will focus on the integration of the African American athlete into big-time college sport in efforts to demonstrate how the increasing importance and commercialization of the college sport enterprise coincided with integration. Next, it will outline and discuss the interest-convergence principle (Bell, 1980; 2004) and use it as an explanatory tool to show how issues of race and racism continue to permeate the management decision-making processes and practices in college sport, and the impact this has on the African American male athlete in particular. Furthermore, this conceptual framework (i.e., critical race theory and the interest-convergence principal) will be advanced as an alternative discourse to the current discussion on college sport reform issues. The presentation will conclude with some important implications for research and practice pertaining to the management of stakeholder interests in big-time college sport.