College sport and social capital: Are students 'bowling alone'?

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Saturday, May 31, 2008 8:00 AM - 8:25 AM Presentation (25-minute) Abstract 213

Intercollegiate athletics have long been associated with an array of benefits for the colleges and universities that maintain them. In addition to the myriad literature examining the impact of big-time intercollegiate athletics (e.g. Sperber, 2000) upon monetary donations, success in big-time college sports has been linked with such aspects as academic prestige (Lucas & Lovaglia, 2005), admission applications (e.g. Toma & Cross, 1998), graduation rates (Tucker, 1992), sense of community (Clopton, 2007), and more. The latter article explored the notion that the presence of big-time intercollegiate athletics served as a common bond between the student body and would contribute to the overall sense of community. Using the success of the institutions in the annual Director's Cup standings, it was determined that the larger the presence of athletics on campus, the greater the level of community from the respondents, a relationship that was moderated by both gender and an institution's Bowl Championship Series (BCS) status (Clopton, 2007). However, the personal connection of each respondent to the athletics program, as a fan or athlete, was not utilized in the analysis. This personal connection lies at the heart of community studies. The ability to connect students on the periphery and tie them into the campus environment is a prominent argument behind the impetus to fund intercollegiate athletics at the highest of levels (Toma, 1999).

The notion of these personal connections also forms the foundation of the idea of social capital. An increasingly researched area - but still slightly ambiguous - sociological phenomenon, social capital is generally accepted as consisting of networks of relationships based on trust, norms of reciprocity, mutual obligation, and cooperation (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Using this operational definition of social capital, a menagrie of the community-based literature exhibit a strong correlation between community and social capital (e.g. Colelough & Sitaraman, 2005), with the elements of trust and reciprocating social networks maintaining the distinction between the two. Trust is based on common experiences that have forged strong bonds and attachments among members. Moreover, trust is predicated upon the shared sense of belonging to a larger social group, such as business organizations, churches, political parties, or even colleges and universities (Colelough & Sitaraman, 2005). The social networks are often focused on meeting specific immediate goals, like finding a job, surviving in a new society, improving a neighborhood/community, even matriculating through college and earning a degree. These networks express a rational, utilitarian side of human relations where networks activate to accomplish specific tasks and trust is generated according to people's ability to contribute (Coelough & Sitaraman, 2005). As society becomes increasingly consumed with materialism and frenetic-paced lifestyles, the need for social capital generation is becoming of the utmost imperative for the survival of a community or society, penetrating nearly every dimension of life (Coelough & Sitaraman, 2005; Putnam, 2000).

While contested in other terrain of literature, social capital is still a largely unexplored phenomenon in the sport management literature, and, even, in higher education - two areas of life that involve ample opportunities for communities and social capital generation. Social capital is seen in work on sport and communitarianism (Jarvie, 2003), social class and sports involvement (Wilson, 2002), and sport and social exclusion (Stemple, 2005). The idea of social capital within intercollegiate athletics is not void, however. Utilizing ideas such as social networks and community, sport management literature has touched on similar notions connected to big-time college sport (Clopton, 2007; Toma, 2003). Using anecdotal research on high-profile college sports programs, Toma (2003) examined the ability of college sport to integrate members of the college community, from students to faculty to alumni, and more. Recent work has examined the idea of social capital within fan communities, the most widely-available avenue for sport team connection (Heere & James, 2007; Palmer & Thompson, 2007). Still, a dearth of literature exists examining the social capital creation and maintenance that occurs within big-time college athletics. Included in the benefits from social capital and community involvement, is the idea of community and social integration, a topic salient to higher education literature as it contributes to improved student persistence rates (reference) and higher student satisfaction (reference). Thus, this research study sought to examine the extent to which the presence of big-time athletics on campus contributed to the student social capital of that university.

Undergraduate students were randomly-selected online from 41 BCS-affiliated universities across the nation. A total of 6150 e-mail notices were distributed in the fall of 2007 requesting participation in the project. After eliminating undeliverable e-mail messages and those subjects who declined participation (N=1350), a total of 1,578 respondents completed the surveys for an overall response rate of 33%. From there, 363 students were removed from the sample for either demographical reasons (i.e. graduate student, non-traditional student) or for failing to complete enough of the survey. Thus, the result was an overall usable sample of 25.3% (N=1215).
To explore for a connection between athletics and social capital, students were asked to indicate their own personal identification with the athletics program, either as an athlete, or as a fan using five-items from the Sport Spectatorship Identification Scale (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Social capital was assessed via the five-item Social Capital Assessment Tool, or SCAT (Krishna & Shrader, 1999). The SCAT was constructed upon the two constructs of trust and norms of reciprocity, utilizing such items as "Most students/faculty at this university are basically honest and can be trusted," and "Students/faculty are always interested only in their own welfare here." Additionally, students were asked a litany of demographical questions to control for such influences as campus experience, educational capital, and family capital.

A hierarchical regression analysis was employed, using fan identification to predict one's level of social capital. Utilizing the Input-Environment-Output, I-E-O, entry model often used in student development literature (Tinto, 1977), variables entered in three separate steps, beginning with the characteristics that students bring with them to college (input). This was followed by those characteristics derived from the college experience (environment), followed, in the third step, by the intended output, or fan identification. Results indicate that fan identification provided a slight, but significant, contribution to the student's social capital after controlling for such factors as educational and family capital, athlete status, and peer-group interaction (R² =8%, B=0.30, p<.001). In other words, the extent to which one maintained an identity as a fan of the athletics teams on campus, the greater their social capital, a measurement built upon trust and norms of reciprocity, or reciprocating social networks. Notably, one's status as an athlete (dummy-coded as non-athlete or athlete) did not significantly contribute to the relationship (B=0.05), though most likely to do low numbers of reporting student-athletes.

Initial implications from the study suggest that identifying as a fan with the athletics teams on campus does possess the ability to contribute to social capital. This is due, most likely, to the communities that are created through fandom (e.g. Heere & James, 2007), thus, improving the social networks that are necessary for the maintenance of social capital. Still, fan identification provides a unique contribution even after controlling for some of these networks in the peer-group interaction variable. Further research is necessary to unveil the deeper constructs that belie the creation of social capital through fan identity, such as university identity or the assessment of which outcomes are derived from one's social capital. In practice, the current data suggest that student affairs administrators might consider utilizing fan identity, not merely of the high-profile sports, but of all the sports on campus to improve social networks between students. As learning communities are created to bridge academic disciplines to improve both academic and social integration, perhaps a similar endeavor might be created to bridge athletic and non-athletic related social opportunities.