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Athletic Department Awareness and Action Regarding the Environment: An Exploratory Study of Athletic Department Sustainability Practices

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Sport, from shoes to stadia, has a vast environmental footprint (Falt, 2006). Each fertilizer application, each flip of the light switch, each beverage can sold/consumed is inextricably linked with the environmental issues facing sport managers today. In her 2008 Zeigler Lecture, Thibault (2009) spoke of issues facing the sport world in relation to globalization forces and one of the challenges she noted is the environment and its relationship with sport. She concluded the “environment is consistently compromised to accommodate participants’ involvement in sports” (Thibault, 2009, p. 12). Like Thibault, Maguire (1999) argued, “deteriorating environmental conditions make the playing of particular sports more difficult, sometimes the necessary land or water conditions simply no longer exist. In addition, air and water pollution put the health of athletes in jeopardy” (p. 142). Ironically, personal benefits (e.g., health) are put at risk because sport and exercise activities “can also degrade the environment upon which good health depends” (Schmidt, 2006, p. A286) as land and resources are used to continually improve the sporting experience (e.g., new stadia, outdoor recreation and tourism).

Historical methods of framing and addressing the environmental movement are failing to achieve the needed objectives and changes. A new message of individual action and ownership in developing a sustainable existence is needed as we move into the future (Macnaghten, 2003). Thus, in sport management, environmental action is as much a part of strategic decision-making and daily operations as marketing and fundraising; the environment must become part of a holistic operational strategy.

The purpose of this study was to examine American collegiate athletic department personnel in relation to their organization’s sustainability practices, organizational strategies, and personal perspectives at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) universities.

Since the internal management structure differs for athletic departments, each athletic department at 119 NCAA FBS (i.e., Division 1A) universities was contacted to identify the person most responsible for sustainability initiatives. To determine the best person, three criteria were used: 1) the administrator with the best access to information related to sustainability and environmental efforts in the athletic department, 2) the individual must be accessible and have specific knowledge about overall operations, and 3) have leadership duties within the department. A survey link was e-mailed to the single contact at each university. The survey response system was anonymous and encrypted using Secure Sockets Technology. Each contact was e-mailed and called before the close of the survey to ensure a high level of survey participation. The link was open between 10 April and 23 April 2009. The survey questions (91 items) were designed to examine athletic department personnel awareness levels and concern for environmental issues as well as the strategies and practices at work in their respective athletic departments. No templates for this type of study were found, so the research team developed a questionnaire based on their experience and key concepts about the role of athletic departments in regard to sustainability issues. To enhance content validity, a sustainability director at Harvard University helped design the instrument.

Overall, the sample consisted of a representative from 97 out of 119 FBS universities (response rate = 81.5 percent) answering the survey. A total of 92 out of the 97 universities completed the full survey. The survey error level was +/- 4.3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. Of the total sample, 96 of the 97 are Associate or Assistant Directors of Athletics, Facility Directors, Facility Management, or Sustainability Managers. Major sections of the survey included prioritization, planning, decision-maker perspectives, initiatives and implementation.

Prioritization. A majority of the respondents (72 percent) felt his or her university has a high or very high priority on environmental and sustainability initiatives, while only 43 percent felt these initiatives were a high or very high priority within the athletic department. Additionally, 74 percent felt that the emphasis on environmental programs within the athletic department will increase in the future.

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Planning. A majority of the respondents (79 percent) indicated that they did not know if the president of their university had signed the U.S. University and College President's Climate Action Agreement (Coplon-Newfield, 2009). A total of 89 percent of the respondents indicated their athletic department does not currently have a sustainability plan in place, but 15 percent are currently considering it. Less than 10 percent of the athletic departments are currently measuring or planning to measure greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, an essential step in prioritizing and evaluating progress of sustainability plans.

Decision-Maker Perspectives. In general, the respondents felt that the perspective of key decision-makers related to environmental initiatives was positive (89 percent). When asked about views relating to initiatives and the bottom line (budget), 33 percent felt environmental initiatives were negative to the bottom line, while 27 percent thought there would be no effect (cost neutral), with a lesser percentage (4 percent) feeling they would improve the bottom line. The respondents were mixed on how environmental programs affect fan loyalty with 42 percent indicating that there would be no effect, 30 percent thinking they would increase loyalty, and 28 percent not knowing. While only two of the universities indicated they have extensive information (survey results, demographics, etc.) related to fans concerns for environmental issues, 38 percent indicated that they have started to gather this information and plan on gathering more. In addition, respondents were asked to rate eight concerns about green initiative programs. The most salient concerns were an unclear return on investment, green programs being a distraction from the department's main goals, too little expertise within the department, and initiatives interfering with game enjoyment. Less salient concerns were a negative reaction by the press and fans, keeping ahead of other universities, and green programs being a passing fad.

Overall, the results indicated that environmental practices and sustainability may be a high priority, but many of the athletic departments have not acted on these priorities. It appears that there may be some disconnect between the general university and their efforts and the athletic department. Based on the responses, this may be due to a hesitation toward implementation based on an unclear return on investment or lack of communication/direction between athletics and the general university administration. Additional findings as well as limitations and future directions related to this line of research will be further discussed in the presentation.