Utilizing Grant Funding to Promote Social Development: A Unique Way to Teach and Learn

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This presentation addresses the ability for sports to be a powerful tool in cultural exchanges, global awareness, and youth development, and the ways in which sport management faculty and departments can play an active role in those opportunities. In August 2009, the Center for Sport Leadership (CSL) at Virginia Commonwealth University was awarded a $250,000 U.S. State Department funded grant for a project, developed by its faculty, entitled DISCUSS: Developing and Improving Synergies in Chinese and United States Soccer. In hopes of growing the network of faculty and sport management programs applying for grants of this nature, the presentation will discuss the development of the DISCUSS program and the process of securing external funding for the exchange.

Over the past several years, the CSL has been extending its global reach and utilizing sport and sport management to promote cultural understanding, educate on issues such as disease and crime prevention and create new opportunities for its students to make an impact on the local and global community. In searching for occasions to continue this, CSL faculty developed the DISCUSS program and submitted a grant proposal for a funding opportunity under the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Having been awarded the funding, the faculty and students have begun work on the program, which will take place over the next two years.

The goal of DISCUSS is to promote cultural understanding between citizens of the United States and China through the sport of soccer by training youth soccer coaches in the practices and methodologies of both on-field and off-field techniques and tactics aimed at building players to be successful in soccer and in life. These aims will be accomplished through strategic partnerships with the Richmond Strikers Soccer Club (RSC), the Shanghai Football Association (SFA), and iChina Sports.

History: The U.S. and Chinese Women’s National Soccer Teams made sports history on July 10, 1999, when the two teams met in the final of the FIFA Women’s World Cup at the Rose Bowl. It was the most-attended women’s sporting event in history with an official attendance of 90,185 and inspired a new generation of young girls in the United States to play soccer.

However, women’s soccer in the U.S. and China have headed in two different directions in the ten years after that historic final match. U.S. Youth Soccer reports that it registers over 3,000,000 youth players between the ages of five and nineteen and has over 300,000 dedicated coaches nationwide. The participation of girls and women in soccer remains strong and is still growing in the U.S. It is estimated that 40% of all soccer players in the U.S. are female and the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team won the Olympic Gold medal in the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

While soccer, especially women’s soccer, keeps growing in U.S., women’s soccer in China has remained stagnant in the years since 1999. The Chinese Women’s National Soccer Team has failed to reach the semi-finals of any major international women’s soccer tournament since 2003. It is reported that the Chinese Soccer Federation currently has less than 1,000 registered adult women’s soccer players nationwide. Even though Shanghai is the largest city in China with more than 20 million people and the Shanghai Football Association (SFA) is one of biggest members of the Chinese Soccer Federation, SFA currently has only 1,764 registered youth soccer players under the age of 18, among which only 455 are girls. Furthermore, SFA has 100 registered youth soccer coaches and only 21 of them coach girls teams.

The two main contributing factors to the current state of youth women’s soccer in China are funding and the traditional Chinese culture as it relates to sports, especially girls playing sports, both of which will be discussed as part of the presentation. Given this background, this project will provide a very rare but highly valuable opportunity for a delegation of regional Chinese youth women’s soccer coaches to gain first-hand experience on youth soccer development and the youth sports culture in the U.S. and learn from their U.S. counterparts through training and information sharing. A delegation of U.S. coaches will also have the opportunity to travel to China under this program to interact directly with Chinese youth soccer players and their coaches and parents in order to build awareness.
about the important educational values of soccer and sports. This project will not only help youth soccer, but also potentially reshape Chinese culture about sports in the longer term by educating Chinese coaches and parents about the important educational values of soccer and sports.

Program details: The DISCUSS program will bring 12 Shanghai Football Association coaches from China to the United States for a two-week training program on developing, managing, and coaching youth soccer. Two tailor made programs will be developed for the participants, one through faculty, staff, and students at VCU and the other by the coaches and managers of the Richmond Strikers Soccer Club. The classroom component focuses on sport management principles such as off-the-field management and development of youth soccer clubs, as well as the importance of utilizing sports, namely soccer, to develop youth in other areas of their lives such as life skills, leadership, self-confidence, decision making, etc. The on-field component, hosted by the Richmond Strikers, will concentrate on the actual on-field development of youth soccer players.

In Phase II of DISCUSS, six delegates from VCU and RSSC will travel to Shanghai to continue the coaching and youth sport management training with a larger number of SFA coaches, as well as with other coaches from outside the Shanghai region. The 12 SFA coaches who participated in the U.S. based program will serve as leaders and partner with the 6 U.S. delegates in creating a program to help build youth soccer in Shanghai by training more coaches.

The project hopes to meet its goals of increasing cultural understanding between the two countries by encouraging an open exchange of ideas between all participants, developing tools to overcome obstacles to the growth of youth soccer, and creating lasting ties between all delegates that will encourage future teamwork and collaboration.

This program and others like it have already and continue to impact the quality of teaching and learning at the CSL. By participating in real-world opportunities such as DISCUSS, the faculty are able to integrate their learning into the classroom and continue to grow as educators. Additionally, the practice of sport management as a field benefits as those outside the industry recognize the impact that sports can have on local and global communities. It is the goal of this presentation to encourage other programs and faculty to seek external funding or other opportunities to utilize sport as a vehicle for social development.