Intercollegiate Athletics’ Impact upon Member Commitment and Construed External Image

Aaron Clopton, Louisiana State University
Bryan Finch, Oklahoma State University
Timothy Ryan, University of Memphis

Organizational theory/culture
Abstract 2010-182
June 5, 2010 1:25 PM
Poster (Audubon)

Institutional image is described as the overall impression made on the minds of the public about an organization (Barich & Kotler, 1991). Salient features to an institution's image include name, products/services, tradition, ideology, and the impression of quality stemming from individuals interacting with the organization’s clients. Thus, an institutional image and reputation can impact the belief of shareholders about an organization, even leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy when the perceived image or reputation differs from reality. In higher education, this image and reputation is often measured in two dimensions — perceived academic prestige and perceived athletic prestige (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003). Similarly, construed external image refers to a member’s beliefs about outsiders’ perceptions of the organization. The construed external image provides more than just information about the probably social evaluation of the organization. This CEI is reflected back to the members of an organization into how the organization and the behavior of its members are likely being seen by outsiders.

The intent of the current research, then, was to explore the relationship between intercollegiate athletics and two outcomes of university, or organizational, identity: affective commitment and construed external image (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

Data were collected from randomly-selected college students (N=1800) from university website directories across NCAA BCS institutions. A total sample of 934 students responded for an overall response rate of 51.89%. After removing students from the sample due to age or school year limitations (n=187) or due to incomplete responses (n=113), the overall sample of usable responses (n=634) provided a usable response rate of 35.22%. Two separate multiple regression analyses were constructed to predict students’ affective commitment to the university and construed external image of the university. For affective commitment, the eight-item Affective Commitment Scale (Allen & Meyer, 1990) was used with questions such as “I enjoy discussing my university with people outside it” and “This university has a great deal of personal meaning for me.” Construed external image was ascertained via the public subscale from the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), with items like “Overall, being a student here is considered good by others,” and “In general, outsiders respect students here as a whole.”

The presence of athletics success was assessed with three measures: Overall Director’s Cup point totals, men’s basketball winning percentage, and football winning percentage. The Director’s Cup point totals were utilized for the measurement of broad-based success in athletics and their use in previous literature, while basketball and football represent the highest-profile athletics presence of most schools. Tinto’s (1977) Input-Environment-Output method to analyze the responses of college students was used for hierarchical input of the independent variables in the regression steps. However, due to the nature of exploration on the extent to which each variable of athletics success impacted prestige, the three variables were entered together in the final step using a stepwise method of entry, as opposed to previous steps where variables were theoretically-guided into the analyses.

Initial results indicated that athletics success did significantly predict construed external image, but not the students’ affective commitment.

Specifically, construed external image was significantly impacted by only the Directors’ Cup Point totals contributing the most (β=.21, p<.001). Notably, with university identity also contributed to construed external image (β=.27, p<.001), team identity played no significant role in the relationship. Further, the Director’s Cup Point totals also mediated the relationship between university identity and construed external image. This finding further illuminates the relationship between athletics and university connections of students.

Findings here suggest a more unique relationship with athletics and students, where athletics delivered no change to the salient outcome of commitment (i.e. either success or through team identity), but athletics did impact...
perceptions of the image of the university. Such a contribution has both positive and negative ramifications for the university.