Misplaced Priorities? Assessing Student Perceptions of Funding for Athletic Programs in Higher Education

Brent Estes, Sam Houston State University
Ryan Zapalac, Sam Houston State University
Dustin Jouhert, Texas A&M University

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Spending for intercollegiate athletic programs is at an all-time high and is continuing to increase at a rapid pace. In 2009, the top ten largest athletic department budgets accounted for an average of $98 million in spending. Based on the rate of spending growth from 2005 to 2009, that amount is projected to rise to an average of $254 million by the year 2020 (Kirwan & Turner, 2010). To some, the realm of big time college sports is considered an asset to university life. Others perceive it to be a business venture designed to generate residual income from prospective students, athletic supporters, and generous alumni. However, there are also those who criticize the over-expansive role of intercollegiate athletics at universities across the country.

Major issues of concern include the aforementioned expansion of intercollegiate athletic budgets and the effect that athletics has on both the quality and emphasis of academics in higher education. How these issues affect the primary stakeholders, students, at their respective institutions of higher learning should be of utmost concern. Student athletic fees account for one of the more important sources of funding for intercollegiate athletic programs (Fulks, 2010). According to a recent analysis, during the 2008-2009 school year, students were charged more than $795 million in student fees to support sports programs at 222 Division I public colleges and universities. Furthermore, these athletic fees can account for as much as 23% of the annual cost to attend a college or university for in-state students (Berkowitz, Upton, McCarthy, & Gillum, 2010).

Of course, proponents generally view student fees as a way to help subsidize a costly university program meant to enrich student life, boost psychic income, and market the institution to a larger population. On the other hand, opponents of student athletic fees typically argue that there are no regulations on how the money is collected and spent, and that these monies could be better utilized in academic endeavors where a larger proportion of the student body would benefit (Sperber, 2001). In addition, claims of preferential treatment for athletes along with allegations of misguided priorities for universities with respect to their athletic programs have created a seemingly inequitable perception among supporters and stakeholders alike. This perceived disparity between academics and athletics is the focus of the current study.

The purpose of this study was to develop an instrument to effectively measure students’ perceptions of intercollegiate athletic programs. It is possible to then examine the relationships between these dimensions and perceptions of athletic program funding. Students (N = 317) at a public NCAA FCS institution in the southern United States completed a survey package that consisted of sociodemographics, seven questions regarding university funding, the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) (Wann & Brancombe, 1993), and the newly developed Perceptions of Athletic Programs-Student (PAP-S) scale. The PAP-S is a 28-item scale that was developed through a comprehensive review of literature and measures student perceptions on a wide variety of intercollegiate athletic department characteristics including funding, focus on academics, and preferential treatment of athletes.

Males (46.2%) and females (53.8%) were, on average, of typical college student age (M = 21.52, SD = 3.69). The vast majority (90.5%) of respondents’ marital status was reported as single. All student classifications were represented, with seniors accounting for 36.1% of the subject pool, but it should be noted that 99.1% of respondents were undergraduates. Nearly two-thirds of respondents received some type of financial support for their studies, with 61.8% reporting a household income below $25,000.

A principal-components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the PAP-S to examine the construct validity of the instrument. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (Kaiser, 1974) was .88, indicating that the sample was adequate for a factor analysis. The Bartlett Test of Sphericity (BTS) was 3472.95 (p < .001), indicating that a factor analysis was appropriate. The factor analysis produced seven factors with an eigenvalue greater than or equal to 1.0 (Kaiser, 1960) and explained a total of 62.93% variance. Items were retained on a factor if they possessed a factor loading of .40 or higher without double loading (Nunnally, 1978). Utilizing these criteria, three items were removed due to double-loading. The factors were labeled as ‘Athletics versus Academics’ with 7 items, ‘Preferential Treatment of Athletes’ with 4 items, ‘Athletic Funding’ with 5 items, ‘Athletic Program Emphasis’ with 3 items, ‘Admission/Quality Education’ with 2 items, ‘Athletic/Academic Balance’ with 2 items, and ‘Athletic Reputation’ with 2 items. Alpha reliability for the factors were .84, .85, .80, .64, .51, .59, and .45, respectively. The overall alpha reliability coefficient for the PAP-S as a whole was .89 (Cronbach, 1951), which is quite good (Nunnally, 1978).
Multiple regression analyses were then conducted to examine the predictive qualities of the PAP-S factors in explaining students’ perceptions of athletic fees. No factors were able to significantly \( p < .05 \) predict perceptions of intercollegiate athletic departments making a profit. However, ‘Athletics versus Academics’, ‘Preferential Treatment of Athletes’, ‘Athletic Funding’, and ‘Athletic Program Emphasis’ were able to significantly \( p < .05 \) predict student perceptions of athletic department fee allocation \( (R^2 = 28.0\%) \) and acceptable athletic fee amount per credit hour \( (R^2 = 17.2\%) \). In addition, ‘Athletics over Academics’, ‘Preferential Treatment of Athletes’, and ‘Athletic Funding’ were able to significantly \( p < .01 \) predict student perceptions of general university funds \( (R^2 = 32.5\%) \) to athletic departments, student perceptions of percentage of university funding \( (R^2 = 17.0\%) \) and percentage of student fees \( (R^2 = 12.9\%) \) allocated to athletics. These findings carry significant implications for university administrators and athletic directors trying to secure increased student support for an athletic department’s financial needs, while avoiding alienation of the student body.