Understanding Donor Patterns in Higher Education: Athletic and Academic Giving

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(including questions)
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The past decade has seen renewed interest in research surrounding the role of fundraising in athletic programs (e.g., Martinez et al., 2011, McEvoy, 2005; Stinson & Howard, 2010). No doubt this has been driven by dramatic increases in the operating budgets of many intercollegiate athletic departments (Fulks, 2010) and the reluctance of many higher education administrators to further subsidize athletic programs out of general operating budgets (Upton, Gillum & Berkowitz, 2010). The vast majority of the research in athletic fundraising, however, has focused solely on the intercollegiate athletics department (e.g., Gladden, Mahony, & Apostolopoulou, 2005). Only a few studies have taken a broader institutional perspective and studied the connection between the fundraising conducted toward intercollegiate athletic departments and fundraising for academic units (e.g., McCormick & Tinsley, 1990; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Stinson & Howard, 2007).

McCormick and Tinsley (1990) were the first authors to document a positive connection between athletic donations and levels of private support directed toward academics at the institution. The authors found that for every 10% increase in athletic donations at Clemson University, there was an associated 5% increase in academic fundraising. Two studies (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2002; Rhoads & Gerking, 2000) included intercollegiate athletics as explanatory factors in models of total institutional giving. Each study found a small, positive effect of athletics, though other institutional factors (e.g., academic quality) explained substantially larger variance in giving. Most recently, Stinson and Howard (2010) studied donors who made significant gifts to both athletic and academic programs. The authors found that these donors gave larger gifts and were retained at higher rates than their peers making only athletic or only academic gifts. As such, the segment of donors supporting both athletics and academics are of substantial value to the university.

The current study seeks to expand understanding of the key relationships between athletic and academic giving. The studies reviewed above suggest that there is at least the potential for athletic and academic giving to complement one another, increasing the total amount of fundraising at the institution. Previous research has suggested that intercollegiate athletics programs are useful in attracting new donors, both alumni and non-alumni, to the institution (Daughtrey & Stotlar, 2000; Stinson & Howard, 2008). How these donors should be cultivated (i.e., should they be solicited for academic gifts as well) may depend on a more thorough assessment of the connections between the two types of giving. The current study, therefore, will contribute to the academic literature by providing a more detailed examination of the athletic giving-academic giving relationship; and, it will contribute to practice by providing additional direction in the use of intercollegiate athletic programs to grow institutional (both athletic and academic) support from private donors. For example, research questions include: Is there a relationship between the number of gifts made to one unit and the number of gifts to another? And, is there a relationship between number of gifts made and amounts donated?

Data for this study were collected from a large, public university competing in the Pac 12 Conference. The data set includes all gifts (both academic and athletic) from donors who have contributed over $1,000 (annually) at least once from fiscal year 1991 through fiscal year 2011. The final dataset contains records for 12,571 donors. While the current study is limited to one institution (we hope to have data from other Pac 12 institutions collected and analyzed before the 2012 NASSM Conference), the donors are heterogeneous and likely share similar characteristics with donors at other colleges and universities. All data analysis was conducted using SPSS 19.0.

The focal dependent variables were annual and aggregate (FY1991-FY2011) gift counts and gift amounts. Gifts were divided into athletic and academic groups. Donors were categorized by the year and college of their first degree earned (at the institution). The more athletic gifts a donor made, both within a year (r=.253) and across the study timeframe (r=.113) were positive influences on the number of academic gifts made by the same donor. Perhaps most interesting is the more recent annual data which suggest that the positive relationship is strengthening. While we do
not have the ability to further test this result within the current dataset, the university has strategically sought to better integrate athletic and academic fundraising over the past 3-5 years. Perhaps surprisingly, the number of gifts made by the average donor to athletics or academics did not vary by the College in which the initial degree was earned. Across all alumni donors, the strong preference was to make athletic gifts (on average, 20% of all gifts were made to support academics; the range was from 13% for Architecture graduates to 28% for Law school graduates). Average gift counts on an annual basis did not differ by year of graduation (i.e., older and younger graduates have similar gift count patterns).

While differences in gift counts were minimal outside the clear preference to direct gifts toward athletic programs, there were more substantial differences in the amounts donated. Consistent with previous research (Stinson & Howard, 2004) the average academic gift is much higher than the average athletic gift ($20,208 vs. $7521, p=.000). In essence, while fewer academic gifts are made, they are on average substantially larger gifts. There are also significant differences in gift amounts based on College of initial degree. Not surprisingly, gifts from College of Business graduates (average Athletic gift $9111; average Academic gift $47,640) significantly and substantially exceed gifts made by College of Arts and Sciences graduates (average Athletic gift $4883; average Academic gift $3410, p=.000). Clearly, College of graduation is an important factor in soliciting a gift amount, though it is not a significant factor in soliciting the gift itself.

The current results reaffirm an important role for athletics in recruiting donors to the institution. The data suggest that cultivating additional academic gifts (by count) from athletic donors may not be as important as cultivating higher academic gift amounts from a smaller number of athletic donors. In this dataset, these donors show a preference for making more gifts to athletics, but larger gifts to academic programs. Future research will extend this research to a broader sample of schools.