The Role of Integrity, Fairness, and Accountability in University Athletics Donor Decision: Trust and Commitment Perspectives

Yong Jae Ko, University of Florida
Tae Ho Kim, University of Florida
Young Do Kim, The Florida State University

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The current economic climate has fostered the proliferation of donor-supported organizations (charities) worldwide, resulting in increased competition for individual donations (Nonprofit Almanac, 2009; Schwinn, 2008). Today, nonprofit organizations, including institutions of higher education, rely ever more heavily upon donations from their alumni due in part to the reduced funding from federal, state, and local governments (Hibbert & Horne, 1996; Kirchner, Markowski, & Ford, 2007; Wunnava & Lauze, 2001). The university athletic programs are no exception. The majority of these programs have become increasingly dependent on private support largely from their alumni members (Stinson & Howard, 2007). A successful donor program not only requires institutional leadership and athletic success (Cermak, File, & Prince, 1994) but more importantly, a deeper understanding of the donors’ perception of the organization. Thus, it is essential that managers clearly understand the common characteristics of individual donors and factors that influence the donor decision making process (Clotfelter, 2003; Edmondson, 1986; Wunnava & Lauze, 2001). There have been surprisingly few attempts made to understand the donors of college athletic programs.

Recently, scholars suggest that consumers’ trust is the most important requirement for building such relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In light of the growing importance of individual giving to the sustainability of University athletic programs, the development of a clearer understanding of donor behavior has become increasingly important for University athletic programs. In response to the call for more research on this important segment, we examined the role of consumers’ perceptions about the college athletic programs in predicting their trust and organizational commitment by focusing on integrity, fairness, and accountability. The issues of accountability and trust toward an organization received extensive attention in the fields of public administration and management for decades. However, in the 1990s, the integrity and performance of nonprofit organizations became a major issue (Young, Bania, & Bailey, 1996).

A research model was developed and tested to examine whether donor perceptions (i.e., fairness, integrity, and accountability) about a university athletic program positively influenced their trust in and commitment to the organization, and ultimately their future donation intentions. Based on the extant literature, trust, and organizational commitment were hypothesized to positively influence donation intentions. Commitment mediates the relationship between trust and donor intentions. This study offers theoretical contributions to the sport management literature.

The target population was athletic department donors housed in an NCAA Division I-A (i.e., Football Bowl Subdivision) university. After receiving approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board and from the athletic department’s development officer to conduct the study, an e-mail invitation to an online questionnaire was sent to the list of athletic department donors. A total of 816 responses were received yielding 644 usable questionnaires. In terms of demography, the average age of the participants was 55 (M = 56.19, SD = 12.15) ranging from 19 to 89 years old and 78% percent were male while 22% were female. Most of the participants were Caucasian (75%), followed by Hispanic (21%), Asian (.5%), and African-American (.3%). This was an affluent group with an average income of $142,783. Overall, 66% of the sample reported an annual income higher than $75,000 and 25% were higher than $165,000. In terms of donation level, the average annual giving and average lifetime giving were $6,212 and $82,010, respectively. All measures were adapted from existing scales. For example, measures for Trust were selected from Crosby et al.’s (1990) scale and Palmatier et al.’s (2007) scale. Commitment was measured by selected items from Mahony et al.’s (2000) Psychological Commitment to Team scale. Donation intention was measured with three semantic differential scale (likely to unlikely) items as consistent with existing advertising research (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). The response format for all other items was a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.
The hypothesized model was tested using a simultaneous equations model with Mplus 6.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) resulting in an adequate fit to the data (S-B $\chi^2$/df = 383.82/137 = 2.80, CFI = .97, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .057, WRMR = 0.728; SRMR = .034). The direct path from fairness (standardized $\gamma$ = .277, and S.E. = .05), integrity (standardized $\gamma$ = .515, and S.E. = .07) and accountability (standardized $\gamma$ = .214, and S.E. = .06) to trust were significant. The direct path from fairness to commitment (standardized $\gamma$ = .252, and S.E. = .08) was significant. However, the paths from integrity and accountability to commitment were not significant. These results indicate that trust is a significant mediator of the relationship between the three antecedents (i.e., fairness, integrity, and accountability) and commitment. The direct path from trust to commitment (standardized $\beta$ = .423, S.E. = .114) and the path from commitment to giving intention (standardized $\gamma$ = .792, and S.E. = .06) were significant and all other paths were not significant. This result indicates that the strength of the indirect path from fairness, integrity, accountability, and trust through commitment to donor intention was significantly greater than the direct paths. This study highlights the importance of donors’ belief on fairness, integrity and accountability of the athletic program as antecedents of their trust, and the importance of building donor trust in predicting their commitment and donation intention.

Managers in college athletic programs continue to work hard to build donor trust and commitment toward their organizations while preparing effective strategies to develop positive consumer beliefs and perceptions about the organizations.

The results of this study examined the importance of three salient variables (i.e., fairness, integrity, and accountability) in predicting donor trust and commitment. In particular, donors’ perceived integrity of an athletic program was found to be the most important variable in building donor trust. In the United States, numerous big time athletic programs have suffered from such major issues as recruiting violations, drug issues, and coaching staff’s and athletes’ on-field and off-field unethical behavior. They critically impact current and potential donors’ perceptions of the programs and become a major threat for the sustainability of university athletic programs. Limited scholarly attention was given to these important issues and as such, further empirical studies are warranted for theoretical understanding of donor behavior.