‘To be or not to be, that is a Question!’ A Panel Discussion on the Relevance, Practicality, and Opportunities of External Funding for Sport Management Scholars in Research Universities

James J. Zhang, The University of Georgia
Jennifer Bruening, University of Connecticut
Alison Doherty, Western University
Laurence Chalip, University of Illinois
Daniel Funk, Temple University

Teaching Thursday, May 29, 2014 60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop (Conference Center B)

Abstract 2014-051 2:10 PM

Research universities have long been a critical element to the economic development and social advancement of North America, due greatly to their undertaking and accomplishments in academic research and innovations that address critical national, regional, and global challenges. A research university’s core business is typically focused on the discovery, dissemination, and application of new knowledge. A university’s research competency and achievements are key to its reputation and increasingly the basis of its academic and financial success. A high level of discovery is widely recognized as critical for expanding the knowledge base and the supply of highly educated individuals who provide economic vitality and competitiveness to the society. Research inquiries also drive improvements in teaching and learning that result in student learning of cutting-edge knowledge. Due to the current economic conditions, declining federal funding, record reductions in state funding, drops of endowments, and intensifying market competition, today the research universities in North America are more uncertain about their future than ever before. As universities have sought to increase research revenue streams, externally sponsored research has achieved greater prominence (The Research Universities Futures Consortium, 2012). The financial climate at research universities has made external funding even more of a focus than ever before and even more competitive (Hogan, 2009). Other sources of revenue, including private fund-raising and entrepreneurial efforts (Rotheramel, Agung, & Jiang, 2007; Siegal, Wright, & Lockett, 2007) have also taken on increased importance in academia.

Scarcity of resources has engendered a hypercompetitive “winner take all” environment and increased the difficulty of managing academic research activities (The Research Universities Futures Consortium, 2012). When compared to some other academic disciplines, sport management faculty members in research universities oftentimes find themselves in a much more tenuous position (Bruening, Evanovich, & Fuller, 2010). Given the relative youth and the applied nature of sport management as an academic discipline, there is little grant money available in this area of study (Mahoney, 2008). Some programs have thrived on their funding success, some have been hurt by the environmental demands within institutions, and even others can be immune to the pressure (Zhang, 2012). How can individual sport management faculty members play a role in the grant dollar acquisition to strengthen their research program and support students hired through the funded projects (Bruening et al., 2010)? Sport management programs are popular with students and show no signs of slowing in that popularity; however, the pressing reality is that research universities need more than tuition dollars to survive and thrive. Without prospects for external funding, sport management programs and their faculty members may face tenacious challenges in receiving support and respect, striding for greater achievement, advancing individual careers, and ultimately thriving in the university community (Mahoney, 2008). For scholars in sport management, where grant dollars for research appear to be few and far between, the situation can be discouraging and may even have a negative impact on the motivation of pursuing externally funded projects (Bruening et al., 2010).

Consisting of five established scholars from research universities, who have had extensive external funding records, this roundtable discussion panel will address many contemporary issues associated with the relevance, practicality, and opportunities of external funding for sport management scholars in research universities. After outlining the processes to seek, secure, and manage external funding, questions for discussions will be raised in the following three areas: (a) external and internal pressures, (b) facilitating changes in processes and systems, and (c) potential opportunities.
External and Internal Pressures

1. What are the original, ingenuous, academic reasons to secure external funding (e.g., enable one’s research agenda, engage and pay students, and facilitate knowledge mobilization)? What are the reasons not to do so?
2. Some faculty members in research universities are often being told explicitly that if their research interests or research focus is not one that is likely to secure national competitive grants, they should change their research agenda. How can faculty members balance this institutional pressure with (a) academic freedom, (b) the sociology of knowledge, and (c) the challenges of maintaining a personal research agenda?
3. Are some sport management scholars resisting the pursuit of external funding because of what may be seen to be unrealistic external pressures? Conversely, many scholars in research universities chase grants that are tangential at best to their research work, just to be part of a grant, and some even have to change their research agendas in order to be able to attract funding. How can this be beneficial to the individual faculty member, research group, and university?
4. In research intensive universities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to be promoted (or even hired above assistant professor rank) without having secured one or more large grants. What are the implications for the sport management discipline if this trend continues to gain traction?

Facilitating Changes in Processes and Systems

5. Not all research dollars are equal. Industrial grants (which usually carry a low indirect cost rate) are not as favored as national competitive grants (which carry a high indirect cost rate). The agency agendas of national competitive grants have higher value to research universities and therefore for one’s career advancement (although oftentimes less relevant to the sport industry) than do connections to the sport industry. What are the implications of this notion for those sport management scholars who want to get contracts that are more industry relevant? How can the discipline of sport management and its scholars be more relevant to granting agencies? From both an individual and institutional perspective, what are the pros and cons for obtaining funding from the sport industry versus national competitive grants?
6. Sport management scholars may face particular challenges within their own institutional systems. Do the academic processes and structures that currently exist pose challenges to the sport management discipline? What changes are necessary to position the sport management discipline to be better prepared for external funding opportunities? How can sport management scholars develop funding opportunities through investing time in developing diverse types of centers for research or professional development, internships, and industry outreach?

Potential Opportunities

7. Governmental and foundational funding opportunities usually exist in dealing with great social problems, such as education, youth development, health issues, national security, and social well-being (Mahoney, 2008; Smith & Works, 2006; Zhang, 2012). Should sport management scholars tap into resources in these areas? If so, how?
8. The discipline of sport management is not typically viewed as a critical area of study to improve human well-being; however, through building cross-disciplinary and community partnerships, the potential for sport management scholars to gain access to more grant dollars may exist. How can this be accomplished? Additionally, in an increasingly globalized marketplace, how to identify, nurture, and garner international funding opportunities?
9. Some of the external funding opportunities available for sport management scholars are often related to industrial service, professional training, or community education. How can sport management scholars incorporate research components into the service, training, or educational projects so that both organizational and individual objectives can be achieved, creating a win-win situation?

While it is improbable to solve the many challenging issues associated with external funding through one discussion session, the panel intends to make good use of this opportunity to initiate sincere dialogues on how best to approach and address the pressing concerns that are faced by sport management faculty members, particularly those in research universities. Although sport management scholars in research universities are challenged by the high demand for external funding, funding opportunities do exist. Oftentimes, successfully garnering external funds and in the meantime maintaining one’s personal research agenda require scholars to think and act creatively and unconventionally, which would in part include facilitating changes in processes and systems.