The issue of stadium financing has for multiple decades been of critical concern to Sport Management scholars (for example: Friedman & Mason, 2001, 2005, 2007; Friedman, Parent & Mason, 2004; Friedman & Silk, 2005), sport economists (Fort & Winfree, 2013; Humphreys & Mondello, 2007; Siegfried and Zimbalist, 2000), and sport sociologists (Friedman, 2010; Friedman & Andrews, 2011; Friedman, Andrews & Silk, 2004). Once distilled to their most foundational exigencies, these seemingly multifarious contributions to the field have tended to focus on two interrelated dynamics: the political economy of the stadium (governance of economic activity; capitalization of political process) and stakeholder agency in the stadium-building decision-making process (the extent to which individuals with some direct investment in the stadium have power or legitimacy in decision-making processes). The impetuses for these lines of inquiry tend to overlap around concerns for the uneven or inefficient use, or democratic allocation, of public resources (for the purposes of private accumulation).

In this 60-minute session, the presenters provide a multi-perspectival study into the unique case of Towson University's newly opened 4,800-seat, $68 million sports arena (recently renamed SECU Arena). Using the extended 60-minute format, the contributors draw upon a range of methodological and theoretical approaches (namely sport marketing, organizational theory, consumer behavior, political economy, and sociology) to offer a first-of-its-kind, holistic account of the social, political, and economic “costs” incurred by stakeholders of the new arena. Looking specifically at the interconnected experiences of stadium-related stakeholders identified by Putler & Wolfe (1999), this research engages current students, university faculty, public officials, athletes, alumni, and current and former university and athletic administrators to explicate the living consequences of new stadium construction. More to the point, the researchers blend standard quantitative and qualitative research methods, survey-based student-oriented cost-benefit analyses, focus groups, and traditional observational research with more interpretive qualitative research via critical ethnography, in an attempt to both provide a heuristic framework for accounting for the social and economic “costs” of such facility ventures.

In the session, the presenters first map the various stakeholders groups involved in the political processes leading up to the approval fund the arena (Maryland state legislature, Board of Governors, lenders and bond issuing agencies). They then demarcate the processes of becoming a stakeholder in Towson’s new arena; with a particular emphasis on differentiating the political and economic interests of those stakeholders who were directly responsible for authorizing construction of the venue (university administrators, athletics administrators, state policy-makers) and those of stakeholders who were compelled, coerced, or forced into a direct or indirect financial or political connection to the venue (students, taxpayers, faculty, private sector investors, consumers, boosters). The need to make such a distinction, the presenters argue, lies in the need to demarcate the conditions of becoming a stakeholder. Put simply, the evidence suggests that not all stakeholders enter into an arrangement with the same volition or agency.

The presenters then delve into the economics of the new arena, and in so doing illustrate the pre- and post-stadium construction financial insolvency of Towson’s athletics department. In Towson’s 2012 Operating Budget, for example, the University projected that the athletics department expenses would exceed $18 million, while it would generate just under $2.5 million in direct revenues. The operating gap would be met through $14.4 million raised from students through a mandatory and dedicated athletics fee of $399 per semester charged to full time students. Moreover, student fees of $499 per semester are also used to service, in part, $100 million in revenue bonds sold by...
the University System of Maryland towards building a $68 million arena (opened in 2013) and finishing a $32 million renovation of its football stadium.

The session then turns to a multi-perspectival, empirically-grounded ex post facto feasibility study, of sorts, incorporating findings from: 1) an auto-ethnography of inter- and intra-organizational politics, with a focus on tensions arising from State government, faculty, and University administrators following the announcement to eliminate—purportedly for the purposes of Title IX compliance and financial solvency—the university’s soccer and baseball teams in 2012; 2) a season-long (2013-2014) consumer ethnography of events held at SECU Arena; and 3) a survey and focus-group based analysis of students’ perceptions of actualized cost-benefits of the arena.

Given the complexity and depth of research design, this analysis is buttressed by a holistic and robust framework from which to critically interrogate the relationship between corporate collegiate athletics, the University, and its primary stakeholders. Specifically, this approach is comprised of the following elements: Author A offers an auto-ethnographic account of being part of this process; Authors A and E provide an in-depth, observation-based account of the spatial practices of consumer-stakeholders in revenue generating, non-revenue generating sporting and special events (i.e. concerts and fund raisers) at SECU Arena. Author C reports on the attitudes and experiences shared by students during focus groups seeking to gauge their knowledge of the politics, inner-workings of the Arena’s construction, and when presented with said knowledge their reaction to it. Authors B and D will analyze surveys that will assess the “value added” beyond the economic shortfalls—this is all about economizing the benefits and burdens of the new arena.

In total, these interrelated contributions to this session concurrently add to 1) existing stadium finance research—by tracing the experiential benefits and burdens of a new venue (with particular focus on the recourse of stadium financing for those individual and groups who had minimal agency in becoming stakeholders)—and 2) the burgeoning body of research demonstrating the unsustainable paradox of “big time” intercollegiate athletics—where “too big to fail” organizational risk-taking meets “arms-race” speculative financing of aspirant athletics programs to varied degrees of benefit and burden for various stakeholder groups. By putting administrative and organization action in conversation with tax-payer and student-subsidizer attitudes and encumbrances, the presenters believe both scholars and practitioners in college athletics might be able to model and more comprehensively evaluate decision-making processes related to intercollegiate stadium financing.