Eliminating Varsity Sports at a Division III Institution: An Evaluation of Process

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Wolverton (2007) predicted that as financial pressures increased within college athletics, an increasing number of athletic departments would eliminate varsity sports. Keeping in line with this thought, schools such as the University of Maryland, and the University of California, Berkeley have eliminated some varsity sports as a means of achieving financial solvency. Yet, though schools are able to realize cost savings by eliminating sports, many pay a non-monetary price (e.g., negative publicity) with respect to campus and community relationships (Van Rheenen, Minjares, McNeil, & Atwood, 2011; Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, Hums and Ridpath, 2010). Thus, while institutions might be able to solve a hemorrhaging budget by eliminating certain sports, the backlash stemming from the decision comes with costs of its own. For this reason, athletic administrators are encouraged to perform a cost-benefit analysis by which they weigh the financial benefits against the non-financial costs when considering the elimination of one or more varsity sports (Yiamouyiannis et al., 2010). In doing so, athletic administrators must incorporate elements of ethical decision making and social responsibility (DeSensi and Rosenberg, 2003; Malloy and Zakus, 1995) when considering the future of athletic programs.

However, while the intercollegiate athletic literature is replete with research examining the elimination of varsity sports (e.g., Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Sabo, 1998; Van Rheenen et al., 2011; Yiamouyiannis et al., 2010), very few studies, if any, have detailed a systematic process, or lack thereof, by which these decisions were made. Instead, models, such as the Responsible Decision Making Model for Athletics (RDMMA) (Yiamouyiannis et al., 2010), are available to guide sport managers as they make challenging decisions regarding eliminating sports. Furthermore, while the majority of research focuses on sports being eliminated at the NCAA Division I level (e.g., Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Van Rheenen et al., 2011; Yiamouyiannis et al., 2010), institutions competing at lower levels (e.g., Division III) are often overlooked (Lawrence, Mullin, & Horton, 2009). Therefore, as the extant research has yet to adequately highlight a detailed process by which sports have been eliminated at lower levels of competition, the purpose of the current study was to address this apparent gap in the literature. In light of the RDMMA, we analyzed the process that Tech State (a pseudonym), an institution transitioning to provisional membership in NCAA Division III, underwent when it considered a proposal to eliminate its swimming programs. This was done not only to address the call for scholars to study Division III institutions facing decisions to eliminate varsity sports (Van Rheenen et al., 2011), but also as consultation to Tech State administrators so that they might have an institution-specific systematic framework to use when making complex decisions regarding the elimination of varsity sport programs.

For context, in the spring of 2013 the Intercollegiate Athletics Board (IAB), the athletic control board, at Tech State was tasked with providing a recommendation to the institution’s President’s Council on a proposal to eliminate the school’s swimming programs. The proposal occurred on the heels of internal and external audits identifying indoor facility space as Tech State’s biggest athletic need as it transitioned to Division III. To address this need, a working group, comprised of administrators, coaches and students, proposed eliminating the men’s and women’s swimming programs due to low participation numbers and in turn, converting the swimming pool into an auxiliary gym. After much debate, the proposal was ultimately rejected. However, the IAB was commissioned with two subsequent action items. First, the IAB was to evaluate the process by which Tech State considered eliminating the swimming programs against best practices in college athletics. Based on this evaluation, the IAB was to create a new process for Tech State could follow if, and when, considering the elimination of sports. The results (and data) from the IAB’s commission were used to inform this study.

The current research used a case study design as it involves organizing data for “in-depth study and comparison” (Patton, 2002, p. 447). This is appropriate as it represents a process by which “comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information” is analyzed (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Consistent with a case study approach (Patton, 2002), data for
the current study consisted of individual interviews with coaches and student-athletes, surveys from campus constituents, written correspondence between campus constituents (e.g., emails and letters), and other data (e.g., meeting minutes, financial statements) collected by Tech State’s IAB as it considered the proposal to eliminate the swimming programs. Data were condensed, organized and classified in order to construct a case record (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009), with the end result being a narrative of the process Tech State employed when deciding whether or not to eliminate its swimming programs. Next, the narrative was evaluated within the context of the RDMMA.

When juxtaposed within the steps of the RDMMA, findings indicated an inefficient and incomplete process as key steps/strategies within the RDMMA were misapplied or not applied at all. These findings were then used to document a comprehensive framework by which administrators at Tech State could “organize information, ensure sufficient data collection, inclusion of key stakeholders, and assessment of alternatives and potential outcomes” (Yiamouyiannis et al., 2010, p. 72) when making decisions regarding the future of its athletic program. The results, though specific to Tech State, can be useful to athletic administrators at other institutions as they face the difficult and complex issues inherent in governing their organizations.