Prioritizing Factors to Assist in the Decision Making Process of Adding Sports To NCAA Division I Institutions

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The factors, the priorities and the process that NCAA Division I Athletic Directors use to make decisions to add a sport to their institution is often unclear. Decisions are not linear and multiple factors are often at play. Rational choice analysis generally begins with the premise that individuals or groups choose from a known set of alternatives (Duderstodt, 1999). Constraints make choice necessary, and the trade-offs between alternative choices are clear. Assumptions about the environment in which choices are made constitute another area to be considered. This is followed by a comparison to determine pros and cons. In the end, one choice is made because no strong reasons exist to make an alternative choice.

According to the NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report of 1981-1982 and 2009-10, 177 women’s teams and 154 men’s teams were added across all three NCAA divisions in 2009-2010 making a total of 4,459 women’s teams and 3,101 men’s teams added since 1989 (Zgonc, 2010). Access to sport, opportunity, and participation has increased because of the constructs of federal law and court decisions, however inequities in sport continue for both genders. The climate of athletics has changed drastically in the last forty years with an increased call for accountability in the areas of academics, recruiting, gender equity and expectations of sound fiscal practices from both inside and outside of the institutions. There is a lack of literature to understand the reasons why some sports programs are currently being added and experiencing continual growth, while others sit in a fairly status quo position; or worse, are missing out on opportunities to grow or expand.

The media often focuses on gender equity and financial parameters when discussing athletic decision-making, but this study goes beyond speculation and adds to the intercollegiate athletic literature by exploring the factors and priorities involved in decision-making as well as the process to add a sport to an individual institution. What adds to the relevance and timeliness of this study are recent conference realignments as well as the explosion of men’s and women’s lacrosse and women’s sand volleyball. While the study does not focus on any one sport, group or conference, those that responded to the request to participate represented varied by size of institution, category of sport, gender of sport and status of sport. This study attempts to clarify what factors influence the decision-making process that an Athletic Director uses to add one sport and how those factors are prioritized and influence each other.

Research Questions

The primary guiding research question for this study will be:

RQ 1: What factors (or criteria) do NCAA Division I Athletic Directors consider key in deciding whether to add a sport to their institutions?

The secondary guiding research questions for this study will be:

RQ 2: How are these factors prioritized in the process of making the decision to add a sport?

RQ 3: What general decision-making approach seems to emerge?

A literature review demonstrated gaps in the literature and provided support for factors to explore for this study. No studies were located specifically addressing the factors or the decision-making process of adding sports (O’Brien & O’Brien, 2009; Hutchinson, 2008; Cunningham, 2002). Therefore, exploration is needed because no known measures or instruments were evident, variables were not concrete, and no guiding framework or theory appears to exist in regards to the decision-making process of adding sports to NCAA Division I programs. Common themes found in college athletics generally address the need for reform on the field and in the classroom, commercialism and amateurism (Zimalist, 2001), academic integrity Horton, 2011), gender equity(Acosta & Carpenter, 2008) and the exploitation of student-athletes (Benford, 2007; Clopton, 2009).
Theoretical Model

Taking a rational choice theory approach is a key benefit because it allows the researcher to assume that humans make decisions in a rational mode and that their decision-making can be modeled, allowing for predictions about future behaviors, actions, or decisions (Duderstodt, 1999). The Structure of Unstructured Decision Process Framework is used as a heuristic model for this study as it provides a visual of the common elements and blockages in the process of decision-making seen through a rational choice theory lens (Mintzberg, et al., 1976).

Design Overview

The research design of this qualitative, descriptive exploratory study uses in-depth interviews as the data collection strategy. In addition, the research design for this study takes into account a variety of factors and considerations that contribute to a single decision within intercollegiate athletics. The researcher recruited a range of NCAA Division I Athletic Directors to participate. Phone interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol were used to collect pertinent data. The transcripts are currently being analyzed in accordance with Patton’s (1990) strategies, which are then imported into ATLASTi © software program to assist with organizing the data for analysis. This is a cyclical process and data were revisited as new participants were interviewed.

Implications

A large gap exists in the academic research concerning the decision making process of adding sports to educational institutions; therefore, this study will increase the current body of knowledge as well as provide researchers with areas to explore in the future. Institutions and athletic directors will be able to use the discussion and findings from this study to assist them when considering new sport programs for their college or university, while the NCAA may use this same data when considering new sports for emerging categories. Each team that is added to an individual institution allows for additional access and opportunity for student athletes to receive a post high school education. For some students, athletic participation may be their only opportunity to access higher education. Additional benefits of participating on an athletic team include learning about diversity, participating in leadership, and enhancing quality of life.

Results

Currently, data are undergoing analysis; however, results will be included in the conference presentation.