Outcomes of Student-Athlete Engagement in Athletics Departments Sponsored Community Service

W. Andrew Czekanski, Coastal Carolina University
Lauren E. Brown, DeSales University

Abstract 2014-169
Friday, May 30, 2014 3:35 PM
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Carnegie III)

Evidence of community service initiatives undertaken by intercollegiate athletic departments is easily found on institutional websites, in newsletters, and through social media. While there is a growing body of research examining community service and, more broadly, corporate social responsibility (CSR) within intercollegiate athletics, gaps still exist, especially in regards to the role of and outcomes unique to student-athletes. As such, the goal of this presentation is to extend the literature by offering an initial exploration of how student-athletes’ involvement in community service initiatives impacts their relationship with their institution and ultimately the student-athlete’s willingness to speak positively of and donate to the institution after graduation.

Among the many benefits of CSR is the notion it can serve as a form of internal marketing for an organization. Studies have indicated that employee perceptions of the firm are more positive when employees are aware of CSR initiatives (Bhattacharya, Sen, & Korschun, 2008). Furthermore, scholars have argued firms should encourage their employees to be active participants in their CSR initiatives, as employees who are actively involved in CSR practices are likely to have stronger feelings of trust in and identification with their employer (Bhattacharya et al., 2008).

The conception that knowledge and positive perceptions of CSR increases employees’ identification with the organization is well supported within the social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964). More specifically, an organizational application of SET, termed perceived organizational support (POS; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002), has examined the impact of various organizational actions on employees’ perceptions. Studies of POS have found positive significant relationships with a plethora of variables including, but not limited to, positive mood (Eisenberger et al., 2001) and organizational citizenship behavior (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997; Wayne et al., 2002). Additionally, antecedents to high quality POS have been found in the degree of inclusion and recognition an organization offers its employees (Wayne et al., 2002).

Accordingly, SET and POS literature supports the idea that employees who are invested in CSR initiatives are more connected to the organization. The enactment of a CSR initiative by an organization in and of itself suggests the organization cares about the well being of society (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Bhattacharya et al., 2008). As employees become more involved in an organization’s CSR activities, they learn more about the support the organization offers towards others, thus helping to create a positive perception of their exchange partner, the organization, thus increasing employee trust in the organization (Aguilera et al., 2007). Through increasing employee involvement and inclusion in CSR initiatives, high quality POS may be established and result in increased organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior.

Scholarship has established sport organizations can be viewed as businesses, with the team and/or athletic body being equivalent to an organization and athletes being comparable to employees (Jones, 2002; Sage, 1973; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002; Wolfe, Meenaghan, & O’Sullican, 2002). Accordingly, the same benefits found in businesses can be hypothesized to apply to athletic departments who engage their student-athletes in CSR initiatives. It stands to reason those activities encouraging student-athletes to work together to achieve a common goal should increase the attachment student-athletes have to the organization. Engagement in community service activities sponsored by athletic departments should thus follow suit and engender greater levels of attachment and feelings of organizational support from student-athletes to their athletic department. As shown in other organizational literature, this increased perception of organizational support should result in increased organizational citizenship behavior, such as increased intentions to donate back to the university and an increase likelihood of speaking positively about the athletic department (i.e., positive word of mouth). Accordingly it was hypothesized:

H1: The greater the involvement in CSR initiative by student-athletes the greater their perceptions of organizational support (i.e., POS).
H2: The greater the quality of the relationship between student-athletes and their athletic department (i.e., POS) the more likely the student-athlete will donate back to the athletic department after graduation.

H3: The greater the quality of the relationship between student-athletes and their athletic department (i.e., POS) the more likely the student-athlete will be to speak positively about the athletic department.

To address the proposed hypotheses an instrument was designed and distributed to a population of former student-athletes. Due to the difficulty in gaining access to former student-athletes, purposeful sampling was employed. In accordance with the institutional review board (IRB) all participants were notified, via email, of their selection to participate in the study and were asked to complete an online questionnaire. In total, 464 individuals were invited to participate and 78 (16.8%) usable surveys were returned completed. Linear regressions were then used to measure the association between the ascribed variables and to test whether involvement in CSR initiatives was a predictor of the quality of the POS and whether the quality of the POS was a predictor of intent to donate and positive word of mouth promotion.

At the time of submission, data analysis is in progress. The presentation will include the finalized analysis and the corresponding contributions to the both CSR and SET literature. In addition, the practical implications of this study will be discussed. More specifically, the results of this study will be examined in relation to athletic departments designing strategically focused CSR programs. Finally, suggestions for future research will be put forth.