Strange Bedfellows: An Examination of Sustainability Department and Athletics Department Collaboration Regarding Environmental Issues

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A need to address the complexity of natural environment issues in intercollegiate athletics stems from strategic/competitive threats, regulatory and policy formation of various types, stakeholder demand, and personal value systems (Hillman & Keim, 2001; Name redacted, 2010a; Shrivastava & Scott, 1992; Thibault, 2009). Partnerships are often formed to develop environmentally related projects and revenue generating opportunities (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Name Redacted, 2012). At the intercollegiate sport level, environmental efforts are undertaken as part of a strategic effort which involves collaborative processes across university units (Evangelinos & Jones, 2009; Graedel, 2002; Poncelet, 2002, 2004; Wals & Corcoran, 2004a, 2004b). This study aimed to investigate these processes.

Review of relevant literature

Collaboration refers to the processes different parties use to engage with each other to find solutions to environmental problems (Gray, 1989). Collaboration is a common way of cultivating relationships to create innovative solutions to environmental problems, especially complex ones, and within the constraints of current resource situations (Woodland & Hutton, 2012). Collaborative relationships can leverage competencies and resources to accomplish shared and individual goals (Gray, 1989; Name Redacted, 2012; Poncelet, 2002, 2004; Westley & Vredenberg, 1991; Woodland & Hutton, 2012). Despite differences in strategic planning procedures and daily operations, athletics department and sustainability personnel are expected to perform in ways that exemplify university cultures and identities (Owens & Halfacre-Hitchcock, 2006; Swearingen White, 2009; Woodland & Hutton, 2012). Tacit and socially complex skills are involved (e.g., human resources), but there is little understanding as to how these skills and resources coalesce into, are in conflict within, and drive leadership and management actions within collaborative relationships between personnel in each unit (Anderson Strachan, 1996; Chen, 2006; Daft, 2008; Greer, Jehn, & Mannix, 2008; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Thomas, 1992). Collaborative efforts often arise from a need to comply with regulations, organizational policies and actions, or a belief by a person or group of people who see a need to take environmental action (Gray, 1989). Sport organization personnel are also seen as having a social responsibility or a social contract to act in the interest of the community surrounding them (Chernushenko, 1994; Inoue, & Kent, 2012; Name Redacted, 2011; Thibault, 2009). The landmark American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment (ACUPCC) (Swearingen White, 2009) brought environmental issues to the forefront of university level planning and action, which includes athletics departments (Inoue & Kent, 2012; Jin, Mao, Zhang, & Walker, 2011; Name Redacted, 2012).

Thus, this study focused only on the athletics department – university sustainability office collaborative level because their relationship was viewed as the foundational one for all other collaborative activities and their decisions drive environmental change in this context. The literature highlighted the need for an interconnected analytical lens incorporating a natural resource based view of the firm (NRBV) (Hart, 1995) and collaborative efforts grounded in individual perspectives (i.e., VBN, awareness, knowledge) (Gray, 1989; Name Redacted, 2012; Stern, 2000). The literature provided the foundation for the study’s two guiding research questions: RQ1: How did the collaborative efforts in the partnerships between athletics department and sustainability office personnel develop? and RQ2: What challenges were/are faced in the collaboration?
Methods

Qualitative study via exploratory, in-depth interviews was used to capture the contextual nature of the collaborative relationships in this study and to understand personal experiences with environmental issues without privileging a particular paradigm or perspective over another (Black, 1965; Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sharma & Vredenburg, 1998). A grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to analyze data combined with interconnected conceptual lenses of collaboration (Gray, 1989), environmental awareness, knowledge, and actions (Creswell, 2007; Name Redacted, 2012; Stern, 2000), and natural resource oriented views of organizational operations (Hart, 1995). Potential participants were selected through a purposeful sampling method that included personal contacts of the researchers and individuals who accepted invitations to participate sent to athletics department and sustainability offices. The latter came from universities with sustainability programs involving athletics noted in the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education Bulletin (AASHE) from 2007 – 2010. Twenty-eight public universities were identified and personnel from thirteen of the schools responded (N=17). Twelve people held positions in sustainability offices, four held positions in athletics departments, and one was part of a hybrid operation combining both entities. The interviews were conducted across three main areas: Personal Perspectives about the Environment, Strategic Partnership Development, and Initiatives Undertaken. Ninety-nine single spaced pages of data were generated and grounded theory analysis of the interview transcripts was done (Black, 1965; Charmaz, 2000; Leff, 1992; Slagell, 1991). The result was sixty initial, open codes. Continued review (axial coding, selective analysis) resulted in a final five central themes: Relationship Development, Relationship Communication Content, Relationship Decision Making Development, Collaborative Efforts, and Relationship Challenges.

Discussion and Implications

This exploratory study identified three key implications. First, the respondents reflected the multiplicity of ways to go green. Such diversity not only involves the personalities and nature of the collaborators themselves (and relevant stakeholders), but also the ways the relationships are created, enacted, and developed over time (e.g., collegiality, decision making) (Poncelet, 2002, 2004). The respondents also noted the importance of resource issues within different strategic and tactical decisions (Hart, 1995; Scott & Gough, 2003). Second, the relationships examined meet Gray’s (1989) five characteristics of collaboration, but it was noted the sustainability office played a greater role in forming the context of the decisions with athletics department personnel retaining different levels of decision-making power (e.g., sign off, full vote on a committee). Finally, the results of this study showed the university and its stance on environmental issues is an important stakeholder, but not always an active one. In only a few interviews did a significant presence from the university administration come into play. Athletics and sustainability offer two intriguing areas for university strategy. Both are visible means of educational outreach, marketing, and publicity, yet both seem to be at odds with each other (e.g., watering synthetic field hockey turf to avoid athlete injuries).