Thinking Outside the Arena: Re-Positioning Sport Management Scholarship to Secure External Funding

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Introduction
Reductions in state appropriations and other economic realities of higher education have increased the importance of external funding in the contemporary academic enterprise. This is particularly true in “market-oriented” higher education systems such as North America (Clark, 1983), where departments not only compete for external funding to resource their respective programs, but also to attract and maintain resources within their own institution or college (Liefner, 2003). Sport management scholars are not immune to the pressures of securing external funding, particularly from prestigious research foundations and government agencies (Inglis, 2007). In addition to pragmatic reasons for securing funding, research funded through external agencies has been shown to enhance connections between universities and practice (Bozeman & Gaughan, 2007). Funded projects also provide opportunities for faculty and students to work collaboratively on innovative projects that address timely social issues, and align with critical institutional values (e.g., public service and engagement) (Morphew & Harley, 2006).

Historically, sport management scholars have had limited success in acquiring grant funding for research (Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008; Mahoney, 2008). Conversations related to improving the success of sport management, similar to other disciplines, have primarily focused on building grant writing competencies (for example, see Walker, Foreman, & Seifried, 2014). However, solely developing the “hard skills” necessary to successfully contribute to writing grant proposals is but one step to developing a sustainable research funding stream. Sport management research must be relevant to solving significant social issues, and sport management scholars must bring compatible skills and a unique perspective and knowledge to collaborative research teams. Additionally, researchers who develop sustainable funding mechanisms must be capable of demonstrating lasting impact of their research.

Edwards and Welty-Peachey (2010) argue that narrow definitions of sport management and sport management research, particularly definitions that focus on the marketing and promotion of commercial spectator sports, may hinder the ability of sport management scholars to justify the benefits of their research to external funders or potential collaborators from other disciplines. Alternatively, sport management scholars who take a broader perspective of sport, or foster research focused on how sport management can address comprehensive social issues such as economic development, physical inactivity, youth development, environmental and human health, and community development may be better positioned to capitalize on grant funding opportunities.

Purpose
The purpose of this presentation is to promote discussion on the strategic re-positioning of sport management research programs to align with the existing and future strategic goals of funders, and why this approach is critical to creating sustainable funding sources for sport management research. Using our own research program as a primary case study, we will present lessons learned from our own experiences. Our team has successfully secured a number of internal and external grants totaling in excess of $3 million over the last eight years. From these projects we have funded and supported graduate students and published over 150 peer-reviewed publications and research presentations. To ensure information resonates with a variety of audiences, these experiences will be articulated from the perspectives of a full professor, associate professor, assistant professor, and doctoral student. Having viewpoints from different career stages will provide more nuanced insights, and facilitate a discussion of how this process has developed a foundation for a niche sport management academic program. Finally, we hope to provide a forum for other scholars to bring forward other success stories and challenges faced through this process as well as critiques to our perspective on building a funded research agenda.
Presentation and Discussion
The presentation and subsequent discussion will focus on particularly salient lessons that have been learned by the team through their various experiences. These lessons will include the importance of framing research around compelling topics that extend beyond the traditionally narrow field of sport management. Although theoretically intriguing and scientifically rigorous studies may provide interesting results and prove publishable within discipline-specific journals, they may ultimately be antithetical to building a sustainable research agenda that is appealing to funders. This seems especially true as the value of social science research has become more heavily scrutinized in North America as taxpayers demand increasing accountability for government funded research (Glover, 2014; Miller, 2014). For example, in 2011, Senator Tom Coburn released a report identifying a number of studies used to highlight wasteful and frivolous research conducted by academics. Among the studies highlighted were those focusing on the best time to buy a ticket to a sold out sporting event and why the same teams always seem to dominate the NCAA basketball playoffs (Miller, 2014). The ultimate merit of this research is not up for debate; however, the prevailing sentiment is that research which is not conducive to interdisciplinary inquiry or focused on solving broad societal problems will remain less relevant to funders.

Recommendations and examples will be provided of how similar theory and rigor appreciated within the sport management discipline has been directed at exploring topics related to poignant social issues and outcomes that have proven more attractive to funders. Furthermore, the importance of interdisciplinary collaborations, and understanding what the sport management discipline brings to such collaborations, will be discussed. In addition to these content-based discussion points, lessons related to strategic management will also be presented. For example, the importance of developing a recognizable track record in a specific area will be discussed, along with how this is translated into a sustainable and attractive research agenda. Similarly, the presenters will highlight how smaller funding sources may be leveraged to attract larger projects, and how a diverse array of external partnerships can be effectively managed. Finally, the importance of meeting (and exceeding) expectations with tangible deliverables, and disseminating results and findings outside of the discipline and beyond journals in order to demonstrate impact will be discussed.

Conclusions
Establishing a new agenda to inform the positioning of sport management research requires a shift from the traditional North American sport management paradigm. In his recent keynote at the European Association of Sport Management, Slack (2014) argued that sport management has tremendous potential to contribute to solving global problems related to environmental sustainability, social equity, community development, youth development, and physical inactivity. Slack’s message has echoed those of other leading sport management scholars who suggest the future success of our academic field will be based on the ability of its scholars to engage in broader interdisciplinary research (Doherty, 2013), present new perspectives on socially relevant issues (Mahoney, 2008), and provides a clear linkage between sport and other policy and practice sectors (Chalip, 2006).

In our case, research focusing on sport management’s contribution to health promotion, youth development, environmental sustainability, and community development led us to re-frame our sport management undergraduate and graduate programs to ensure compatibility with this perspective. The integration of “socially and environmentally responsible sport management” content into core curricula will provide students with a broader and more critical perspective of sport practice. The use of new research and teaching methodologies related to this content may be essential in the development of further research capacity, additional funding sources, and alignment with strategic goals of our college and university. As other sport management programs re-frame their research to address key social issues, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and move beyond individual or commercial outcomes they may also become more competitive for external funding and ultimately contribute to the increased legitimacy of the sport management discipline within the academy as well as with external stakeholders.