CSR Initiatives in College Athletic Programs: A Website Content Analysis of Community Service Endeavors

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The impact of college athletics to the society is greater than ever, and its role has become very crucial in many aspects of our society (Benford, 2007; Coakely 2014; Jarvie & Thornton, 2006). Like other entities, it is important for college athletic programs to be socially responsible and become involved in activities that contribute to the well-being of the society. In order for an organization to be socially responsible, it should demonstrate the commitment to socially responsible activities and programs (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs have become a main staple for marketing strategies to solidify their legitimacy within the community, and more broadly society. The concept of CSR refers to “actions that appear to further some social good” (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001, p. 117). With organizations aware of this, many have acknowledged the importance of CSR and have made significant contributions to improving the well-being of individuals upon which these organizations operate. Entities in sport have also widely embraced the principles and practices of CSR over the past decade (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Bradish & Cronin, 2009). CSR practices through sport offer a unique opportunity for athletic organizations to give back to the community that supports their teams. For example, nearly all professional sport teams have established charitable foundations over the past decade (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Godfrey, 2009).

Within intercollegiate athletics, CSR initiatives have become an important component to community support and the student-athlete experience. NCAA and almost all of its member institutions identify community service as a vital element in their mission statements (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011). However, there is a disparity between the stated mission and community service actions taken by members of the athletic department (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011). It is essential for community service efforts to be visible to the community to ensure they are acting in a socially responsible manner. Engagement in community service activities sponsored by college athletic departments has shown significant benefits to the community (Jarvie & Paulen-Koba, 2012). Equally important is the frequency of community service within the athletic programs.

Although community services have become one of the main research streams in many academic areas, such as marketing, consumer behavior, management, and communications, there has not been much research regarding the use of CSR practices in intercollegiate athletics. The purpose of the present study was to explore the extent of which NCAA Division I athletic programs are engaging in community service activities. This investigation was done through community service-related activities found on each of the athletic programs’ websites. Moreover, the researchers examined the frequency of community service activities and if there were any significant differences among FBS and FCS conferences.

A content analysis of 151 college athletic websites, 23 conferences (10 FBS and 13 FCS) and 128 FBS schools, was conducted by three trained coders (one sport management faculty and two sport management master’s students) during a month period. The three coders worked independently to review and code each of the 151 websites. A codebook, which was created by the authors during a pilot study, was used to code contents more accurately and efficiently. The authors completed a pilot study on 40 websites and created coding categories. Throughout the pilot study, the authors focused on four main categories; the existence of community endeavor (1-yes, 0-no), locations for the community service activity links, types of community service activities, and audio-visual methods to present community service activities. Following the pilot study, the authors reconciled the coding differences and checked the initial intercoder reliability for each category by using Krippendorff’s Alpha (α). Krippendorff’s α is the most reliable coefficient to measure intercoder reliability among several measures and is particularly recommended for studies with three or more coders (Joyce, 2013). Krippendorff’s α for each category lied between .85-.91, which
indicated good intercoder reliability. Face validity, as Riffe et al. (1998) suggested, was used to assess if the categories were well-defined with a logical and consistent coding scheme.

The results revealed that only 35%, 8 (5 FBS and 3 FCS) among 23 conferences, of Division I conferences included members’ community service activities on their websites. Among the 128 FBS college athletic websites, only 32.5% (49 schools) included community service endeavors on their websites. In terms of audio-visual presentation methods, of the 49 schools, approximately 75% (n = 35) athletic departments displayed photos, 18% (n = 9) have both photos and videos, and 14% (n = 7) have only included brief descriptions of activities without photos or videos. For the location of the links, 75% (n = 35) of athletic departments listed their community service activities under the “Inside Athletics” tab, 12% (n = 5) under the “Fan zone” tab, and only one program has an independent tab to list community service activities. In regards to the types of community service activities, athletic departments were primarily involved in four major areas of community service efforts: Education (reading, literacy, and drug prevention programs), Goodwill efforts (hospital visits, habitat for humanity, women’s and children’s shelter visits, fundraising events, autograph sessions, special events participations), Health and Wellness (community fitness, cancer awareness, Leukemia and Lymphoma society, sports for cure, kids health days), and Youth development (camps, clinics, leadership and mentoring programs, Boys and Girls clubs, Big Brothers and Sisters programs).

Involvement in community service has been proven as one of the most effective ways to build relationships with consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2006; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004). Consequently, over the last couple of decades, the number of organizations that have been involved in community service has increased exponentially in various industries (Kotler & Keller, 2006). However, the findings of this research showed that although college athletic departments get involved in a variety of community service activities, the number of college athletics that participate in community service are considerably low. Only one third of FBS and FCS conferences and FBS athletic departments feature community service activities on their websites. This finding is particularly distressing because NCAA and almost all college athletic websites clearly indicate that community service is one of the major missions that college athletic programs strive for.

Thus, it is strongly recommended for athletic administrators to encourage student-athletes to get involved in more community services and to exhibit their community service endeavors on their websites. By doing so, college athletic programs can achieve their missions and build more desirable relationships within their community.