The Strategic Use of Sport to Grow Enrollment: A Case Study Analysis

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Due to the challenging and changing landscape of higher education, many small private institutions face a continuous struggle for financial solvency (Baker, Baldwin, & Makker, 2012; Carlson, 2015). In 2010, Alderson Broaddus College (now Alderson Broaddus University) was in such crisis and close to bankruptcy. In order to save the institution, administrators turned to athletics. The Alderson Broaddus (A-B) board of trustees actively sought a new leader with a background in athletics to implement a bold prosperity agenda, termed “Admissions Yield Model,” which began with investing heavily in athletics programs and facilities to drive enrollment (Cohen, 2012). Within two years, the campus was revitalized (Adkins, 2013) as enrollment increased from 495 students to 1,143. The purpose of this case study is to unveil a unique institutional strategy with great practical application for many comparable institutions facing similar economic and enrollment issues. Additionally, the work of Stevens and Slack (1998) and Cunningham and Ashley (2001) is expanded by unearthing how strategic choice operates within the confines of institutional isomorphism in the process of organizational change.

Other institutions of higher education have also turned to sport as a means to facilitate goal attainment. Goff (2000) outlined five key contributions athletics can provide to a college or university: (1) financial contributions; (2) prestige; (3) sense of community; (4) media exposure; and (5) student recruitment. A significant body of research has explored sports’ effect on such categories (Kelly & Dixon, 2011; McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; Miller, 2003; Pope & Pope, 2009; Staffo, 2001). However, A-B added a total of 16 teams between 2011 and 2015, and chose to participate at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II level. The employed strategy therefore did not follow the logic presented throughout scholarship related to increasing the presence of certain sports at institutions of higher education. The lack of prescribing to institutional norms would constitute an endomorphic organization (Oliver, 1988).

This case study was constructed through document analysis using the systematic approach (Krippendorff, 2004). Archival data of college/university press releases and local media publications were gathered to reconstruct events and outline institutional behavior (Bowen, 2009). Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Form 990 returns were examined to better understand the historical roots of the situation. In order to guard against biased selectivity (Yin, 1994), all available press releases, media publications, and tax documents between 2010 and 2015 were reviewed. This resulted in the identification of a thematic interplay. A-B instituted an isomorphic strategy of adopting a culture of service to the student/consumer (Johnstone, 1999). It sought legitimacy through additional institutionalized strategies such as adding a football program (Kelly & Dixon, 2011), and even changing institutional status from a college to a university. However, within the overarching strategy of institutional isomorphism, the Admission Yield Model employed at A-B differed greatly from typical institutionalized practices in higher education. The idea of agency and strategic choice (Child, 1972) then becomes necessary to fully explain the organizational transformation.

A-B simultaneously acted as an endomorphic and isomorphic organization and surpassed institutional goals. Through the analysis of institutional behavior, both practical and theoretical implications emerged. The case study highlighted how an institution addressed its plight with a unique application of sport. With a continuous debate over the place of sport in higher education (Sack, 2009), the occurrences at A-B offer potential guidance and strategy to other institutions that face similar tribulations. The research also served to advance our understanding of the interplay between two seemingly opposing theoretical perspectives: institutional isomorphism and strategic choice.

References


