Social Partnerships and College Athletics: A Means to Increase Social Impact on Community Stakeholders

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Sport provides the ability to address societal needs due to the increased appreciation and acceptance of sport in overall society, often athletes and sport organizations can inject themselves into societal debates (Roy, Graeff, & others, 2003). The ability for sport to influence social change through cause related marketing introduces an opportunity for a new organizational form for college athletic departments. College athletic departments are placed in a unique position in their local communities, with the university being the dominant employer for area. The university’s athletic department programs can also serve as the primary form of sports entertainment in the college town, often being dominate in the town’s political structure (D. C. Miller, 1963).

The demand for business to act in a manner to solve ethical situations such as sustainability or social issues is increasing, with the pressure from younger employees wanting a job they feel is improving society (Pfeffer, 1998, 2015). The emergence of increased attention given to corporate social responsibility is linked to the notion that business is given a contract to operate by society; in return the business must fulfill a social duty to society above that of its core business product (Carroll, 1999; S. Waddock, 2008). Due to the unique position of small business owners in the local communities to address community stakeholder concerns and the ability to adjust to their needs; small business owners appear to be the best business to fulfill social needs of the community (Burton & Goldsby, 2009; Fassin, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2011). How can university athletic departments work with small businesses in their local community to enhance the social impact on local community stakeholders? The purpose of this paper is to introduce a new organizational type that leverages the unique role of the university athletic department with the strategic nature that small business owners engage in social partnership to increase the overall social impact of the local community.

Theoretical Framework

The proposed framework in this paper is grounded in stakeholder theory and the ability to provide the greatest overall utility to critical stakeholders of the university athletic department and small business owners. Stakeholder theory places an emphasis on providing the greatest potential benefit to the stakeholders instead of shareholders of the organization (Carroll, 1991; E. Freeman, Rusconi, Signori, & Strudler, 2012; R. E. Freeman, 1984). While university athletic departments do not have shareholders, stakeholder theory has been used to describe the demands toward employees, student-athletes, university faculty, staff, students, and community members (Godfrey, 2009; Kihl, Leberman, & Schull, 2010). The proposed model grounded in stakeholder theory focuses on addressing the needs of the stakeholders; the proposed new organizational form is grounded in the framework surrounding the social partnership.

Social partnerships are common in business, enabling a for-profit company to partner with a non-profit company in a partnership to fulfill a need for social demands in the community (S. A. Waddock, 1988). Traditionally, social partnerships are seen in cross-sector relationships, enabling each business to provide their own strategic strength to address an issue in society. These type of relationships are morphed into four arenas: business-nonprofit, business-government, government-nonprofit, and trisector (Selsky & Parker, 2010). The proposed partnership in this paper between university athletic departments and small business fits into the arena of business-nonprofit, due to the nonprofit status of the athletic department. The cross sector partnerships are often organized into three main platforms: resource dependence, social issues, and societal sectors (Selsky & Parker, 2010). The proposed new
organizational type due to the local prominence of the athletic department has the ability to address social and societal issues in local communities.

New Organizational Type

Traditionally, university athletic departments are dependent on sponsorship revenue, which is the only means for a local business to market through sport (Padilla & Baumer, 1994; Weight & Taylor, 2010). The price for the sponsorships is often high, which can place a burden on a small business owner who lacks the financial capital as mid to large business. Small business owners are often relegated to sponsoring sports that do not command the same level of fan attendance or intriguing sports, thus not being able to see as large of return on their sponsorship investment (Gardner & Shuman, 1988). The proposed organizational relationship between small businesses and university athletic departments moves away from the revenue generation model that places small businesses at an economic disadvantage, moving towards one that is reliant on publicity as a social partner with sports providing social benefit to stakeholders of both parties.

The social partnership business model benefits the university athletic department in two manners, the first is for the student-athletes who are able to connect with small business owners in a personal manner furthering the opportunity to get hired after graduation as well as working philanthropically in the community in a manner that produces an impact. The second benefit the athletic department benefits from associated with small businesses is being intimately connected to community stakeholders; strengthen the bond for when the athletic department does not have success in sport.

Small business owners gain the opportunity to increase their overall presence in the local community through the social partnership with university athletic departments. Small businesses are seen as socially responsible and deriving financial performance from this association if they are committed to the community, community support, and sense of community (N. J. Miller & Besser, 2000; Niehm, Swinney, & Miller, 2008). A small business that is able to leverage these strengths in providing social partnership with university athletics is able to benefit by the communities attribution bias toward the athletic programs as well as collaborate on the athletic departments community outreach efforts; building an increased sense of community and commitment to community stakeholders.

Conclusion

The proposed new organizational type of a social partnership between small businesses and university athletic department has the potential to provide a substantial net impact on issues in the local community. Since university athletic departments are prominent figures in the community, small businesses are able to bring their intimate connection to stakeholders providing an overall increase in public perception of the two entities. The athletic department provides social benefits for their student-athletes as well as increasing overall good will or “insurance” when the department falls on hard times (Godfrey, 2009). The proposed framework enables university athletic departments and small business owners to work together through social partnerships, seeking to engage community stakeholders by active participation of student-athletes and small business owners partaking in philanthropic work. The work of the university athletic department’s, student-athletes, and small business owners can enhance the overall perception of the organization, potentially increasing the revenue generated by each organization (Barnett, 2007; Fitzgerald, Haynes, Schrank, & Danes, 2010; Lepoutre & Heene, 2006). The application of social partnerships driven by the athletic department has the potential to generate a substantial social impact on community stakeholders.

References


