Academic Research Centers and Institutes: Are They Worth the Effort?

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Academic centers and institutes (hereafter referred to as “Centers”) are popular mechanisms to stimulate collaboration and promote the expertise of faculty. Centers are primarily developed to promote and support academic research can serve as a platform for a group of faculty to conduct research with industry partners and attract grant funding. Research in the field of sport management is often misunderstood by industry practitioners so centers are created to bridge the gap between industry research demands and faculty expertise thus building credibility. As a result, anecdotal experiences of the presenters suggests industry practitioners are often more enthusiastic and willing to work with a center rather than an individual department, program or faculty member. In this sense, centers can be valuable branding tools for sport management research and programs. This is particularly important at a time where conversation continues about the disconnect between sport management academic research and industry practice (King, 2013; Zaharia & Kaburakis, 2016).

A wide range of centers exits in terms of organization, funding, size, and focus, so much that a uniform definition and/or structure is non-existent. A scan of the sport management landscape revealed at least 30 centers operate related to sport management in the United States alone. While some centers maybe simply comprised of a single faculty member, a graduate assistant, and a website other research centers are funded by large endowments and employ full-time faculty, staff, and research assistants. Further, a sampling of centers reveals a variety of foci for the work, including centers that promote expertise on topics such as sport and gender, sport and youth, sport marketing, sport and society, sport and law, college sports and spectator sports to name a few. To date, the presenters are unaware of a formal discussion on the purpose, advantages, disadvantages, challenges and opportunities associated with centers. Thus, this session will provide a unique opportunity for interaction and discussion with presenters that have successfully created an academic research centers to aid the field in the process of proposing, developing, and managing a center.

This roundtable will begin with a brief review of academic research centers then the audience will hear from a panel of experts that oversee academic research centers. Each presenter will provide an overview of the purpose, development, structure, and successes/challenges for their center. Then a moderated discussion with the audience will take place allowing for a broader discussion about the implementation and management of centers related to sport management. Attendee experience and interest in centers will be a critical component of this roundtable. Although questions/comments will be accepted and encouraged from the audience, discussion will center on the following topics: (1) benefits of an academic center, (2) challenges associated with operating an academic center, (3) keys to operating a successful center, (4) managing the tensions associated with financial pressures, (5) faculty participation in centers, and (6) administrative concerns. Through this structure, the roundtable will provide a variety of perspectives, experiences, and constructive information to assist academics in the quest to create and manage an academic research center.