Organizing, Function, and Effectiveness of Cross Sector Social Partnerships in Green Athletic Committees

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The modern university athletic department is well-equipped to handle many different challenges. Athletics administrators hold a wide array of competencies, including in communications, development, facilities and event management, marketing and promotions, compliance, legal affairs, licensing, student-athlete support services, and ticketing. Despite these varied areas of expertise, on occasion, a complex problem will emerge that falls outside an athletic department’s core proficiencies, thereby necessitating outside consultation and collaboration. One such problem generating increasing attention is the need to address sport’s impact on climate change and environmental degradation (Casper, Pfahl, & McSherry, 2012; Kellison & McCullough, 2016). Solutions to these problems are difficult to both identify and implement, and they require individuals and teams with expertise not commonly found in an athletic department (McCullough et al., 2016). Thus, in efforts to become better stewards of the environment, athletic departments have begun forming so-called “green teams” consisting of internal and external stakeholders (Natural Resources Defense Council, 2013).

The formation of these teams, or cross-sector social partnerships (CSSPs), can be a complicated process, as individuals and departments may enter the CSSP with diverse (and sometimes divergent) goals and strategies. These differences may be especially pronounced in large partnerships that span the industry, nonprofit, and government sectors. In this study, we examine the process of forming and focusing a CSSP on the goal of advancing pro-environmental initiatives in a large intercollegiate athletic department. Using qualitative semi-structured interview methodology, we explore how an organization, in an effort to respond to environmental concerns, is impelled to adapt its structures, processes, and values through transformational partnerships, and the concomitant challenges that accompany these changes.

Conceptual Framework

CSSPs are collaborations that are “formed explicitly to address social issues and causes that actively engage the partners on an ongoing basis” (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 850). A review of the sport management literature also indicates a gap in understanding CSSPs. Although the examination of cross-sector partnerships in the sport context has yielded several examples (e.g., Babiak, 2009; Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Dowling, Robinson, & Washington, 2013), various stakeholders in the professional sport industry are increasingly forming CSSPs to address environmental concerns (Ahmed & Pretorius, 2010; Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Kellison, Trendafilova, & McCullough, 2015; Pfahl, 2013; Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013; Nguyen, Trendafilova, & Pfahl, 2014). Environmental sustainability initiatives have been assessed in intercollegiate sport through cross-functional collaborations (McCullough, Pfahl, & Nguyen, 2016; Pfahl, Casper, Trendafilova, McCullough, & Nguyen, 2015). Furthermore, most of the literature on sustainability-related partnerships has focused on two types of bisector partnerships, both of which involve the private business sector (Wassmer, Paquin, & Sharma, 2014). Beside the focal involvement of the latter in environmental collaborations, the role of universities has been overlooked in spite of being a critical component for supporting environmental causes. Indeed, the higher education sector may support the capability to generate benefits to civil society, so there is a need to examine this unique social sector more closely when discussing environmental collaborations (Wassmer et al., 2014). Previous research has demonstrated that there is a working relationship, albeit unbalanced, between college athletic and sustainability offices (Pfahl et al., 2015). However, environment-focused CSSPs may serve as a medium through which the perceived academic–athletic ideological gap can be bridged (e.g., Nichols, Corrigan, & Hardin, 2011). Therefore, in analyzing the trisector partnership processes and structures of an innovative collaborative relationship as illustrated by a green committee, this study contributes to both the sport management literature and environmental sustainability partnerships studies.
Method
To examine the evolution of an environmental-focused CSSP, we used qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with members of a sustainability committee (i.e., Green Team) centrally located in a university athletic department in the western United States. The byproduct of this approach allows a broad understanding, or group interpretation, of organizational processes by the members of the committee. This approach also allows for a deeper understanding of how the green committee has performed by evaluating its past, current, and planned initiatives. Semi-structured interviews with each participant ranged from 35–70 minutes. The interview guide specifically examined how the CSSP (i.e., Green Team) was formed, implemented, and evaluated. Interviews were recorded with permission of the participants and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

This particular committee has existed since the early 2010; a sign of the slow emergence of such committees at the intercollegiate level, this committee is one of the earliest and well-known sustainability committees in sport. The committee has been tasked with forwarding the athletic department’s environmental sustainability objectives, and it has been recognized nationally for its sustainability initiatives. As a CSSP, the Green Team is made up of more than 20 individuals (including students and student-athletes, university personnel, and industry partners) representing a wide range of departments, including business and finance, operations, marketing, grounds and facilities, ticketing, university sustainability, waste management, and concessions.

Results and Discussion
Based on our initial analysis of the data, three distinct themes emerged through the interviews with committee participants as they related to the formation, function, and effectiveness of CSSPs. Specifically, analysis of the data demonstrated themes of transition and growing pains, the role and limitations of green ‘champions’, and the challenges to break down silos (i.e., within the athletic department and between athletics and external stakeholders). First, the committee had initially been tasked by upper management within the university and athletic department to oversee renovations to their football stadium, but ever since the committee has been lost at properly engaging committee members and departments within and beyond athletics stalling the committees more recent successes. Secondly, as a result of the initial direction and subsequent managing of the committee by a primary ‘green champion’ from athletics, the committee is structured like an athletics department and not aligned with specific goals of the committee (e.g., waste reduction, energy) that would otherwise be seen in sustainability oriented committees. Thirdly, the current structure limits the breaking down and free flow of collaboration originally intended by the committee to forward the athletic department’s sustainability goals. Lastly, specific attention will be given during the presentation to the application and the contributions of this study to both the sport management literature and environmental sustainability partnerships studies.