Social Impacts of College Athletics beyond Institutions: A Systematic Review

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Purpose: Recently, the structure and organization of college athletics in the U.S. have received attention from other countries, such as Japan (Schonbrun, 2017) and Indonesia (Emont, 2017). For example, the Japanese government and universities are aiming to industrialize the country’s college athletics by establishing an umbrella organization that models the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and U.S. intercollegiate athletic departments (Japan Sport Agency, 2017). To gain public support for such an endeavor, it is important to answer the fundamental question of why college athletics should be developed. There is a substantial body of research that examined the institutional benefits of college athletics for universities, such as increases in student enrollment, donations, and brand recognition of the university (e.g., Anderson, 2017, Cox & Roden, 2010). However, what is less known is how the benefits of collegiate athletics extend beyond the universities themselves to positively contribute to a range of stakeholders, both internal (e.g., student-athletes, the general student body, faculty and staff) and external (e.g., alumni, local residents, and local governments). Addressing this question is essential, because the stakeholder theory highlights the importance of managing the relationship with stakeholders for the long-term success of organizations (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Parent, 2008). Moreover, stakeholders of college athletics would assist in the establishment and development of collegiate athletics in various ways, including providing funding for program operations and the construction of stadiums and arenas.

In the sport management literature, the impacts of sport (e.g., sport teams, events, facilities) on surrounding communities and stakeholders have been evaluated from two aspects: economic and social impacts. Of them, previous studies failed to find strong support for the positive economic impacts of sport events and facilities, including those relating to college athletics (Baade et al., 2008, 2011). As such, increasing research attention has been given to understand the social impacts, or intangible benefits, of sport (e.g., Inoue & Havard, 2014; Taks, 2013). Notably, Crompton (2004) proposed a framework of the psychic income of professional sport franchises defined as “the emotional and psychological benefit residents perceive they receive” (p. 49). Other researchers defined social impacts of sport more broadly; for example, the Social Impact of Sport Scale developed by Lee et al. (2012) included health literacy, human capital, and social capital, along with impacts capturing emotional and psychological benefits. This lack of consensus regarding the definition and scope of social impact, together with the absence of robust evidence for positive economic impacts, highlights the importance of answering the following research question: What are the social impacts that college athletics can provide to their stakeholders? This study represents the first systematic effort to answer this question by critically reviewing extant research that explored different types of intangible benefits U.S. college athletics may bring to their stakeholders and offering a synthesis of what this body of research collectively tells us about the social impacts of college athletics.

Method: We conducted a systematic literature review (Tranfield et al., 2003) using five major electronic database: SPORTDiscus, Business Source Premier, Academic Search Premier, Scopus, and Social Sciences Citation Index. We also supplemented the database search by manually searching relevant articles using Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed journal articles, technical reports, book chapters, and theses/dissertations written in English and published before August 2017 were reviewed. Our keywords and search terms were selected based on Crompton (2004) as well as subsequent empirical studies examining the social impacts of sport events (e.g., Inoue & Havard, 2014; Kim & Walker, 2012). A total of 146 articles were initially identified from the databases. To select studies to be included in this review, the first author reviewed the titles and abstracts of all articles identified from the databases and obtained the full articles that had some relevance to our focus. The first author then reviewed these full articles to determine the final list of studies to be included for the current systematic review. Subsequently, another author reviewed the
articles retained by the first author and confirmed that all articles were consistent with the scope of this review. Through this process, 23 relevant articles were retained.

Based on the suggestions of Tranfield et al. (2003), the articles were analyzed both descriptively and thematically. For the descriptive analysis, the following variables were analyzed to describe the characteristics of the reviewed articles: publication year, academic field in which a study was published, type of study method, and study population. For the thematic analysis, inductive coding was conducted to find themes that illustrate types of social impacts examined in the articles. All authors reviewed and confirmed the description of each theme as well as studies representing the theme.

Findings: The descriptive analysis showed that 21 out of the 23 studies were published after 2007. Twenty studies used quantitative methods, and 20 studies were published in peer-reviewed journals in sport-related disciplines. Twenty-one studies examined internal stakeholders, namely, general university students, students-athletes, and faculty members, while two studies focused on benefits accruing to local communities (e.g., residents). From the thematic analysis, we identified four major themes describing specific types of social impacts of college athletics: (1) psychological benefits, which captures Crompton’s (2004) concept of psychic income within the college athletics settings, (2) social capital, which refers to how college athletics promotes the development of social networks or relationships, (3) social adjustments to college, which shows how students’ involvement in college athletics enhances their adjustment to their university, and (4) development of the campus community, which describes the relationship between athletic programs and the building of communities on campus as indicated by academic citizenry and communal values. Moreover, regarding the first theme of psychological benefits, we identified two subthemes focusing on specific aspects: (1) increased sense of community, which involves individuals’ perceptions of being a university or community member, and (2) emotional changes, referring to the enhancement of one’s self-esteem and well-being. The first subtheme, increased sense of community, was investigated most frequently by the reviewed studies, with 11 articles exploring this subtheme (e.g., Katz et al., 2017; Musser and Peachey, 2016). Other (sub) themes frequently investigated are emotional changes and social capital: six articles examined emotional changes (e.g., Koo et al., 2015; Lanter & Blackburn, 2015), and three focused on social capital (e.g., Clopton, 2011; Woody, 2016).

Discussion: In summary, our findings show four major types of social impacts that may be generated by college athletics. These social impact types collectively suggest that developing college athletics may psychologically benefit their stakeholders and enhance these stakeholders’ quality of life. However, as our descriptive analysis reveals, most of the studies examined an impact on internal stakeholders. Additionally, the extant research explored only limited types of social impacts, as indicated by the fact that almost half of the studies focused on how college athletics promote a sense of community. Given that college athletics need to be supported by a range of stakeholders, future studies should examine broader social impacts, especially by focusing on the perceptions of stakeholders outside of universities, such as local residents and government officials. Moreover, to further understand the value of developing college athletics, environmental forces that would lead other counties to adopt the NCAA governance model should be identified, as those forces were not explored in the reviewed studies on social impacts.