An Examination into the Tactics Employed by a Sport Advocacy Organization to Retain Athlete Constituents

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Other)
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On February 27th, 2017, The Chronicle of Higher Education published a report on major trends impacting higher education for the upcoming year. One of the 10 major trends for 2017 was the increasing activism by athletes in America (Brown, 2017). The report spoke to the resurgence of athlete activism in recent years. Since 2014, athlete activism has risen in popularity off the athletic field (Schmittle & Sanderson, 2014) and at all levels of competitive play (Brown, 2017; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). Limited research suggests that individual athlete activism impacts the players, fans, and sport organizations (Kaufman, 2008; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz). While some research on individual activism exists, there is a paucity of research into the sport advocacy organizations that support these athlete activists.

Athlete Ally, an advocacy organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender athletes, utilizes collegiate, professional, and international athlete “ambassadors” to promote the mission of Athlete Ally of ending homophobia and transphobia in the athletic environment. While recruitment of athletes as ambassadors and members is important, retention of these athletes could prove to be even more important to an established advocacy organization. As Bunnage (2014) states, retention is important to study as mobilizing new constituents for an advocacy organization costs considerable amount of resources that could be utilized elsewhere. Additionally, organizations that do not retain activists are likely to recede and progress created from the organization will unravel. According to Bunnage (2014), retention is the “likelihood of, and process by which, activists decide to continue their social and political activities” (p. 433). There are three main factors that contribute to retention or dropout: the individual factors, social factors, and organizational factors (Bunnage; Corrigall-Brown, 2012; Nepstad, 2004).
Factors that may encourage or inhibit participation from the individual's standpoint are the individual's resources, biographical availability, commitment, and efficacy. From the social standpoint, collective identity and social networks may influence one’s participation in activism. Finally, the organizational characteristics and capacity can inspire or discourage an individual from participating in an advocacy organization and social movement. The current study investigates how these factors contribute to the retention of athlete constituents to a sport specific advocacy organization.

The purpose of the study is to investigate retention tactics utilized by Athlete Ally through a Social Movement Theory (SMT) lens. The proposed study will be guided by the following research questions:

RQ1) What individual, social, and organizational factors contribute to retention of an athlete constituent for a sport advocacy organization?

RQ2) What individual, social, and organizational factors are most salient for an athlete constituent to remain with a sport advocacy organization?

The proposed study utilizes SMT as an overarching theoretical framework. Scholars use the broad theory of SMT to study social movement growth, decline, and sustainability (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Despite the abundance of social movements occurring within sport in America, SMT has rarely been used to study sport specific social movements (Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008). A tenet within SMT, Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), helps focus the broad study of social movements onto the organizations that make up a social movement. Specifically, RMT seeks to understand how advocacy organizations and social movements gain access and mobilize moral, cultural, human, material, and social-organizational resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Specifically, the proposed study will investigate how Athlete Ally sustains the mobilization of its human capital using retaining athlete ambassadors.
Human resources are the skills, labor, experience, expertise, and leadership provided by the individuals within the organization (Edwards & Gillham, 2013).

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology. A case study focuses on a single or a few cases of a real-life context or setting (Yin, 2009). The researcher has already confirmed that Athlete Ally is willing to participate in the study with a written letter from the organization. Additionally, the author has received IRB approval for the study. Starting in the November 2017, the researcher will conduct interviews with members of Athlete Ally including organization elites, board members, lower level employees of the organization, and athlete constituents via phone and Skype. Data collection and analysis will conclude in March 2018.

The semi-structured interview protocol consists of nine questions exploring: how did the individual learn of Athlete Ally, what is their range of political experience, their involvement with other advocacy organizations, when and why they joined Athlete Ally, what activities they have participated in for Athlete Ally, how the group has affected their participation, their feelings towards activism and politics in general, their opinion of the effectiveness of Athlete Ally, and their participation in the organization. Questions for examination were previously utilized by Rohlinger and Bunnage (2015) in their case study examination of retention among advocacy organizations that focus primarily on internet communication technology. Questions were either modified to fit the current bounds of the case. Demographic information will also be collected.

The results, major findings, limitations, and future research will be reported in detail at the 2018 North American Society for Sport Managers conference. As mentioned, data collection will begin in November 2017 and end March 2018. Data analysis will begin December 2017 and end March 2018. The proposed study has several implications, both theoretical and applied. From a theoretical standpoint, the proposed study serves to expand RMT by addressing the major factors that contribute to retention of major constituents in a sport advocacy organization. The study will help Athlete Ally, and other similar sport advocacy organizations, with practical tactics and factors that encourage retention of athletes. Additionally, the research will provide information and insight for athletes who may wish to engage in athlete activism. The individual, social, and organizational factors contributing to athlete retention may be salient for other athlete activists. Finally, the proposed study answers the call from Davis-Delano and Crosset (2008) who encourage social movement research in sport to “serve social movements that they value by doing research that may help the activists to understand how their movements succeed and fail” (p. 131).