Examining the Fundraising Challenges Faced and Strategies Utilized in the NCAA Division II Athletics Environment

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In trying economic times, state appropriations toward higher education have decreased. Academic programs, faculty positions, scholarships and athletic departments have undergone significant financial cuts (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2017). National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II athletic departments rely heavily on state funds, forcing these programs to maximize other revenue channels. This structure requires Division II athletic programs to depend on private, charitable contributions, which are brought in through organized fundraising activities. An athletic department’s ability to engage in successful fundraising is essential for its sustained growth and operation. However, little scholarly work has examined the landscape of Division II athletics fundraising. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise in NCAA Division II athletic departments face as well as the strategies that are being use to overcome those challenges.

This study is grounded in Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory recognizes that organizations have several agendas and stakeholder needs that they must serve. Freeman argues that stakeholders can influence strategic direction for an organization and vice versa. Mitchell, Agle, & Wood (1997) describe the concept as, “the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims” (p. 854). This concept is important to athletics fundraising because of the various stakeholder interests that come into play, from administrators to coaches to donors. Previous studies examining athletics fundraising through the lens of stakeholder theory have found that winning tends to play a significant role in the level of donations athletic departments receive (Covell, 2004; 2005; Stinson & Howard, 2007).

Method

As part of this study-in-progress, semi-structured interviews are being conducted by phone and in person with Division II athletics fundraising professionals representing 15-20 institutions. Institutions are being purposefully selected based on metrics such as enrollment, location, and on-field success. The interview guide is based on the literature and grounded in stakeholder theory. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim. Member checking will be utilized to ensure accuracy and check study interpretations. A priori, thematic coding will be undertaken grounded in stakeholder theory and the literature, particularly as it relates to the claims of power, urgency and legitimacy (Creswell, 2012). An open coding approach will also be utilized to identify emerging themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Expected Findings and Discussion

Expected findings of this study pertaining to challenges are: 1) competition for donor dollars for other university initiatives and from outside organizations (such as Division I athletics programs); and 2) the balancing of various stakeholder claims with different interests (i.e., power – donors, urgency – coaches, legitimacy – fundraisers). Anticipated strategies include: 1) a collaborative effort with the university’s foundation office; and 2) a comprehensive fundraising strategy with buy-in from coaches and administrators. Stakeholders with power are the most influential. Some findings may be unique to Division II due to the secondary position of these athletic departments to Division I programs in the donors’ eyes. The theoretical and managerial implications will also be explicated. This study will be completed by NASSM.