Who is in Charge? An Examination of Social Exchange Relationships in American Collegiate Sport Clubs

W. Andrew Czekanski, Coastal Carolina University
Leeann Lower, The Ohio State University
Patrick Marsh, Samford University

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The history of American college sports proceeds intercollegiate athletics, with students coordinating “ball games” in the 1840s to fulfill a mutual interest in competition (Lewis, 1970). These ball games evolved into formal student competitions across universities, representing the beginnings of American collegiate sport clubs (ACSC). Though universities took control of intercollegiate competitions (Smith, 2011), ACSCs have continued to grow, promoting sport competition and social purposes.

ACSCs are a popular form of college sport, with an estimated 8.1 million students participating in 2018 (About NIRSA, 2018). As clubs are run by student leaders, with the oversight of university officials and sport governing bodies (Mull, Bayless, & Jamieson, 2005), there are a plethora of individuals engaged in exchange relationships to help with club operations. However, research examining ACSCs has focused on the student experience, given the mission of higher education and student affairs (Czekanski & Lower, 2018). By overlooking the numerous actors involved in the management of ACSCs, the potential benefits and hindrances of these relationships - which impact the student experience - are ignored. To enhance club management and student outcomes, this study sought to answer the following research question: What are the characteristics and outcomes of the social exchange relationships within ACSCs?

Social exchange theory (SET) provides a framework from which to study these exchange relationships and outcomes as SET seeks to explain “interpersonal relations and social interactions” (Blau, 1964, p. 4) through an examination of exchange processes. Scholars have noted four defining characteristics must be present within exchange relationships: exchange relationships must be dyadic, interdependent, bidirectional, and involve the exchange of rewards (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1961).

Within sport, scholars (e.g., Barnhill et al., 2013; Czekanski & Turner, 2015) have applied SET to various actors as a means of examining perceptions, antecedents, and outcomes of relationships. However, Blau (1964) noted, “exchange transactions... must be investigated in their own right... to arrive at an understanding of the dynamics of social structures” (p. 13). Thus, past research may be used to provide context for social structures, but it cannot be relied upon to explain them outright.

Following Blau’s statement, and as a means to investigate social exchange relationships within ACSCs, a social constructivist epistemology was adopted (Creswell, 2013). The researchers conducted 60-minute focus groups and interviews with 30 sport clubs (68 student officers) and four sport club professional staff, across three universities, using semi-structured focus group protocol and interview guides. To triangulate the data, documents outlining institutional regulations impacting the exchange relationships were collected. To enhance trustworthiness, strategies addressing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were employed. Thematic and document analyses were conducted to identify emerging themes, with peer review and debriefing facilitated throughout.

Preliminary analysis revealed social exchange relationships between the institution, sport governing bodies, sport clubs officers, and members. Each unique dyad has been marked an interdependent, bidirectional exchange of rewards that benefits both exchange partners. The presentation will focus on each of these exchange partners, their contributions to their relationships, and the rewards they receive from it.