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Strategies Implemented by Top NCAA Olympic Coaches to Enhance Support Surrounding Their Programs

Lee Roberts
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Abstract

A shift in institutional priorities related to profit maximization in “big time” sport programs (men’s basketball and football) has led to the elimination of many men’s Olympic sport programs (Ridpath, Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, & Galles, 2009). As previous literature has demonstrated, coaches can work toward minimizing elimination decisions by raising money that will limit the financial burden of their program on the athletic department (Weight, 2010). Thus, the purpose of the study was to explore fund-raising practices of top NCAA Division I wrestling coaches ($N = 10$) to determine strategies that programs can implement to encourage sustainability initiatives. Following the identification of top coaches, respondents were interviewed to determine factors for giving and the best practices being implemented in the field. The interviews were coded and analyzed for common themes. These themes and their subcategories are discussed to provide a foundation for coaches to implement fund-raising initiatives of their own.

Keywords: *Fund-raising, program sustainability, relationship building, NCAA wrestling*

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Elimination of “nonrevenue” Olympic programs at Division I institutions happens each year, with a majority of the programs cut being men’s sports. This trend has existed for at least the last 20 years, as the number of men’s sports programs in Division I athletics has realized a net decrease since 1988-89 (NCAA, 2010). As explained by Ridpath, Yiamouyiannis, Lawrence, and Galles (2009), the “driving force behind the loss of many men’s sport programs over the past 20 years has been a shift in institutional priorities related to achieving excellence in football and basketball coupled with economic factors involving the arms race, not the drive for equality” (p. 267). The main reasons universities seem to be striving for excellence in these sports is the fact that Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions averaged net revenues of \$3,148,000 in football and \$788,000 in basketball (NCAA, 2011). However, it is also clear that these two sports are receiving the majority of expenditures in athletic departments across Division I, as FBS institutions median values for expenses in football and basketball were \$12,367,000 and \$4,003,000, respectively. Meanwhile, FBS institutions spent an average of \$719,000 on their wrestling programs, the eighth-most of any sport offered in Division I. Unfortunately, when combined with the lack of revenue generation of these programs, wrestling programs have become frequent targets of eliminations when athletic departments decide to cut sports (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Williamson, 1983).

To help illustrate the challenges facing Olympic programs like men’s wrestling, it is useful to examine program elimination figures. When focusing on NCAA program eliminations during the past 30 years, data supports the notion that men’s wrestling has suffered more losses in participation opportunities than any other nonrevenue sport program (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2008). In fact, from 1981 to 2008, the number of programs offered within the NCAA dropped from 263 to 220 (Mike Moyer [Executive Director of NWCA], personal interview, January 26, 2012; National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2008). Thus, as explained by Cooper (2009), the loss in programs has had the following negative impact on participation opportunities in men’s wrestling programs:

With an average estimated squad size of 30 student-athletes, these 143 program eliminations equate to an annual loss of 4,290 participation opportunities for the 256,509 high school wrestlers featured throughout the United States (p. 65).

Further, with the recent economic challenges (Drape & Evans, 2008), the trend of nonrevenue program elimination seems to be continuing, with several men’s wrestling programs being eliminated since 2008 (Moyer, personal interview, January 26, 2012).

Men's Program Elimination

The elimination of wrestling programs has been studied on a few occasions, with all surveying athletic directors to determine the reasons these programs were being cut (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Weight & Cooper, 2011; Williamson, 1983). Williamson concluded that the top reasons wrestling programs were discontinued were lack of student interest, high cost, lack of recruitable prospects, and lack of spectator appeal. In 1995, Gray and Pelzer conducted a follow-up study and determined that conference alignment, shifting resources, inconvenient travel, and cost were the primary reasons for eliminating wrestling programs. Similarly, Weight and Cooper (2011) sought to build upon the previous research of athletic directors' decisions to eliminate nonrevenue sports through a mixed methods approach that utilized a multiple embedded case study and a survey. When comparing the responses between coaches and athletic directors, the budget shortage factor was significantly more important to athletic directors than the coaches. Based on these results, Weight and Cooper argue that coaches "need to place a higher emphasis on the ability to increase revenues realized by their program during the season" (p. 71).

Resource Allocation Theory

The theoretical foundation through which this study is based is the theory of resource allocation, which was initially described by Adam Smith, who wrote:

The market price of every particular commodity is regulated by the proportion between the quantity which is actually brought to market, and the demand of those who are willing to pay the natural price of the commodity, or the whole value of the rent, labour, and profit, which must be paid in order to bring it thither (1776, p. 84).

In 1985, Hackman developed the theory of resource allocation in the university setting. The author stated the "theory is based on five concepts: centrality, resource allocations, environmental power, institutional power and resource allocation strategies" (1985, p. 61). The study found that a unit's centrality interacts with the unit's environmental power and resource negotiation strategies and has a significant effect on its resource allocations (1985). Hackman divides units within an institution into core units and peripheral units. Core units are "essential to the central mission of an institution. Without the core, the organization would have another purpose" (p. 62). Peripheral units, on the other hand, are not essential to the institution's overall purpose. While both units can receive resources, they must seek to obtain resources through different negotiation strategies. Hackman suggests that core units will receive internal resources when they emphasize their individual unit needs because their needs correspond directly with the mission of the organization as a result of their centrality. In contrast, peripheral units

will only gain internal resources when they focus their negotiation on “broader institutional needs and bring in external resources that contribute to the whole” (p. 75).

The theory of resource allocation has been utilized in sport management literature by Weight (2010), who examined the perceptions of athletic directors on the influence of coaches in sustaining Division I-A wrestling programs. Weight argues that “if a program were self-sustained, and/or had significant enough demand from the community to balance the resource allocation equation, then wrestling programs would never be cut” (p. 11). Thus, these programs need to place an emphasis on fund-raising and moving towards fully endowing their program if they want to increase chances of sustainability.

Fund-raising Best Practices

A fund-raiser’s main function is to seek external funding to increase an organization’s resources. To accomplish this goal, the fund-raiser must be able to identify and cultivate the key constituency that is necessary for a strong donor base (Leonhardt, 2011). Building relationships with the community is one of the essential practices for a fund-raiser to increase the possibility of future gifts (Lowman & Bixby, 2011). The first step for a fund-raiser is to have a strategic plan in regards to how to achieve the desired results (Leonhardt, 2011). A critical element of a strategic plan for any fund-raiser is to have a clear mission that supports the organization and allows the desired constituencies to become involved in supporting the organization (Lowman & Bixby, 2011). Wedgeworth (2000) writes that the process of creating and maintaining a relationship is at the heart of any successful fund-raising campaign. While Berry (1983) was the first to use the term “relationship marketing” as a technique for businesses to attract, maintain and enhance customer relationships, Burnett (1992) translated this to “relationship fund-raising” and promoted the idea of dealing with donors as individuals. In regard to this process, communication has been shown to be key in fund-raising as lapsed donors often feel that organizations they previously supported did not provide adequate feedback (Leonhardt, 2001). In addition to keeping donors informed of developments within the organization, fund-raisers also need to recognize gifts of all kinds and sizes through timely acknowledgements and thank you letters (Leonhardt, 2011).

A relatively new tool to communicate and build relationships with current and potential donors is technology (Goecks, Volda, Volda & Mynatt, 2008; Olsen & Frazier, 2001). Specifically, e-mail has been a critical instrument for communication and online donor development because e-mail is a more effective and direct communication tool than a website because it reaches people quicker and provides an opportunity for interaction (Olsen, Keevers, Paul & Covington, 2001). Similarly, Olsen and Frazier (2001) suggest the benefits associated with using email communication for an organization are increased response rates that allow a message to reach a larger audience, creating a dialogue with donors to personalize the

messaging, having the ability to utilize interactive media in communications, and possessing the capacity to measure the behavior of donors. Another way that technology has helped organizations develop better relationships is the ease of providing feedback, including details as to how the gifts are being utilized (Sargeant, 2011), to the donor as well as the ability for the donor to provide feedback to the organization in a simple manner (Goecks et al., 2008; Olsen & Frazier, 2001).

Donor Motivation

Shapiro suggests that athletic giving is unique due to the presence of other factors like team success and tangible benefits as a result of giving (2010). Previous research on donor behavior in college athletics has pointed to benefits like priority seating, parking privileges, special recognition and social events available to donors (Isherwood, 1986). Other previous research identified more philanthropic and altruistic motives for giving to athletics (Mahony, Gladden & Funk, 2003; Staurowsky, Parkhouse & Sachs, 1996; Verner, Hecht & Fansler, 1998). Gladden, Mahony and Apostolopoulou identified helping student-athletes in the form of scholarships and educational opportunity as well as repaying the university and its athletic program as primary motives for athletic contributions (2005). Staurowsky et al. (1996) and Verner et al. (1998) also found evidence that there is a social motive for giving, as donors enjoy the interaction with other donors who closely follow the teams they support.

Nonrevenue Coaching Behaviors

Limited research exists regarding the role of the coach in nonrevenue sports, yet one recent study examined the importance of the coach's behavior in sustaining nonrevenue sports (Weight, 2010). In a popular press article, former Stanford tennis coach Dick Gould said that "the only way many men's tennis programs will survive is if coaches get endowments to fund them" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 37). Gould's statements echo the results of the United States General Accounting Office's 2001 study of decisions to discontinue sport teams and what strategies were used to avoid cutting sports. Coaches who believed they had critical influence on the sustainability of their programs reported implementing relationship-building and fund-raising efforts to partially subsidize their budget (Weight, 2006). In interviews with athletic directors, Weight discovered that building relationships and fund-raising were two of the activities a coach can engage in that would have the biggest impact on the program's sustainability.

With wrestling programs being a frequent target for program elimination, coaches must do everything in their power to help their program. The ability to raise money privately to supplement the operational budget is an incredible asset for any wrestling coach to possess. However, not all coaches have the same understanding of the importance of fund-raising or the skills necessary to be an effective fund-raiser. By interviewing the 10 most effective fund-raisers among NCAA wrestling coaches, the purpose of this study is to provide all wrestling coaches

information on the strategies that programs can implement to encourage sustainability initiatives. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) What are the primary factors that top coaches believe influence someone's decision to contribute financially to a wrestling program, (2) What fund-raising strategies do top coaches implement to support the sustainability of their programs, and (3) Are there trends in the specific strategies that top coaches are implementing in their fund-raising initiatives?

Method

This research was pursued through the use of qualitative research to examine the best fund-raising practices among the 10 most effective NCAA wrestling coach fund-raisers, as determined by the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA). The coaches were selected based on two specific criteria: (1) ability to raise significant funds for program and (2) ability to build strong support system surrounding program in terms of the number of donors. The individuals who rated highest in these categories were included in the sample.

The NWCA collects data regarding all NCAA wrestling programs, including their structure, budgets, and fund-raising amounts per year. With this information, the NWCA is the entity best suited to accurately assess fund-raising efficiency among NCAA wrestling coaches. Semistructured interviews were conducted by phone with all 10 participants using an interview guide that was developed with the assistance of two sport administration professors with expertise in "non-revenue" sports, a major gift director from the University of North Carolina's athletic department, and a qualitative research expert from The Odum Institute, a social science research institution at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Upon completion of the interviews, the transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking to ensure the validity and reliability of the study.

Once the transcripts were approved, the researcher developed a coding scheme to address the research questions of the study and a second coder was trained on the coding scheme. Both coders initially coded 20% of the transcripts together in order to ensure intercoder reliability. Scott's Pi was calculated and found to be .817, which is above the generally accepted level of agreement (.800) to have intercoder reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). After establishing reliability, the remaining transcripts were split between the two coders.

Results

The themes resulting from the analysis were divided into two sections based upon the research question of this study: *Factors for Giving* and *Fund-Raising Strategies*. Three themes emerged from the analysis of each section. Within *Factors of Giving*, the themes identified were Connection, Belief in Program, and Program Status. For *Fund-raising Strategies*, the three themes to emerge were Customer Service, Marketing, and Promotion and Relationship Building.

Factors for Giving

In order to understand how to entice people to give money to a wrestling program, it was important to decipher what motivated someone to give to a wrestling program. Given the unique donor environment for athletics presented by Shapiro (2010), this study sought to determine what coaches believe motivates a donor and how this corresponds to the previous literature on the subject.

Connection. The coaches believed that having a connection to the wrestling program was a major key to the decision to contribute financially to that program. That connection manifests itself in a number of different ways, two of which were identified by all 10 coaches: alumni and wrestling fans. One such comment came from Coach #8, who stated “Alumni are the most important because they are the ones who have a vested interest. Hopefully, they had a good experience and want to be able to provide the same type of opportunities they had as an athlete.” The two additional categories of connection that the majority of coaches felt contributed to the decision to give were access to the program and high school wrestling coaches. The local community and parents of wrestlers were each mentioned by less than five coaches.

Belief in program. The second theme to emerge as a factor for becoming a donor of a NCAA Division I wrestling program was belief in the program. The three categories within this theme included return on investment, coach as a leader, and mission of the program (See Table 1). Six coaches mentioned return on investment and mission of the program as a factor for giving, while only five coaches mentioned coach as a leader.

Program status. The two categories to emerge under of program status are winning and citizenship. Winning refers to having success on the mat, while citizenship alludes to the student-athletes representing the program well off the mat (See Table 1). Winning can have varying degrees, depending on the school. As explained by Coach #1, “If you’re at a school that has three scholarships, you’re not going to win a national championship. So maybe to be third in the conference is winning. So, really, it all depends on your definition of being successful” (Coach #1). Every coach responded that winning is a factor in the decision to give, while six of the coaches felt the citizenship of the student-athletes was a determining factor.

Fund-Raising Strategies

After identifying why wrestling coaches believed donors gave to their programs, the study sought to determine what strategies these coaches implemented to obtain increased revenue through fund-raising. The three themes to emerge from the coding were customer service, marketing and promotion, and relationship building.

Customer service. The theme of customer service consisted of seven different categories: contact database, constant communication, specific giving campaigns,

Table 1

Top Fundraising Coaches' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Giving in Olympic Sport Programs

Factor	Coaches Response (# of mentions)	Example
Connection		
Alumni	10	“Alumni are the ones who have a vested interest.”
Wrestling fan	10	“They’re a wrestling fan, and we keep them involved so they feel important.”
Access to program	8	“People feel a part of the program because they get to know the team.”
High school coach	6	“We’re always trying to make contacts with high school coaches.”
Local community	4	“In the last couple of years, we’re targeting the local community more.”
Previous donor	4	“We get a list from our athletic department of overall donors.”
Parent of wrestler	3	“I target anyone who has a child who wrestles.”
Belief in Program		
Mission of program	6	“We share our vision, where we want to be and how we plan to get there.”
Return on investment	6	“[Donors] want to know their money is making a difference.”
Coach as leader	5	“[A donor] has to believe in you.”
Program Status		
Winning	10	“People like to give to winners.”
Citizenship	6	“[Donors] aren’t going to give to kids that are punks.”

recognition of gifts, thank-you notes, thank-you gifts, and ticket benefits. Of these seven, four categories were found to be the most prevalent. Constant communication, specific giving campaigns and thank you notes were all mentioned by nine coaches, while contact database was cited by eight coaches. Some examples of specific giving campaigns are the “Equip-A-Wrestler” campaign cited by Coach #8 or simply having a list of 20 different specific items a donor could give toward at varying price points, as mentioned by Coach #7. Thank-you gifts, such as team memorabilia, was mentioned by 6 of the 10 coaches. Recognition of gifts and ticket benefits were only cited by three coaches each.

Table 2

Coaches' Perceptions of Customer Service Strategies to Enhance Giving in Olympic Sport Programs

Factor	Coaches Response (# of mentions)	Example
Constant communication	9	“It’s just a matter of regular communication.”
Specific giving campaigns	9	“[Donors] want to know specifics, almost like a business plan.”
Thank-you notes	9	“Anytime anyone gives us a dime, I write them a handwritten thank-you note.”
Contact database	8	“Every person I ran into I tried to get a business card or email address.”
Thank-you gifts	6	“We make sure to give them some wrestling polos.”
Recognition of gifts	3	“Singling [donors] out, giving them credit is important.”
Ticket benefits	3	“Make sure [donors] have access to NCAA tickets.”

Marketing and promotion. The theme of marketing and promotion produced twelve different categories, which suggests there are a large number of different marketing strategies to increase awareness, and ultimately fund-raising, for

a wrestling program. The one category that every coach mentioned was regular program updates. The manner by which coaches disseminate these updates can vary, but it helps create a sense of ownership among donors. “The more ownership people have in a program, the more loyal they are going to be to our program. The key to having ownership is knowing the cast of characters” (Coach #1). The most popular tool to provide these regular updates is Facebook, which nine coaches

Table 3

Coaches’ Perceptions of Marketing and Promotional Strategies to Enhance Giving in Olympic Sport Programs

Factor	Coaches Response (# of mentions)	Example
Regular program updates	10	“I send our regular, timely updates on our team’s performance.”
Facebook	9	“We’ve got over 11,000 Facebook fans.”
Partner w/athletic dept.	7	“We do a lot of cross-marketing with other sports to get in front of their crowd.”
Match updates	7	“We won our meet on Saturday and first thing Monday I sent out my thoughts on the dual.”
Twitter	6	“If you’re not using it, you are falling behind.”
Videos	6	“It’s more eye-opening and it gets people to actually open your emails.”
Newsletters	4	“I created a newsletter with a team preview, Q&A with student-athlete and bios of all our coaches.”
Spend money	3	“I spend a good amount of money but it’s worth the investment.”
Supplementary materials	3	“We’ll sign a few hundred posters and send them out to our donors.”
Scheduling for attendance	2	“We schedule matches on Sunday to make sure we capture the high school wrestlers.”
Text messages	2	“I’ll text alumni in the area to get them to come to a match.”
Website	2	“Wrestling Insider” another tool to keep fans updated

said they used. Coach #7 noted that Facebook is better for the “new guard” of donors who are more comfortable with the technology because it can be more interactive. The other categories which were reported by over 50% of the coaches were Twitter (6 coaches), videos (6), match updates (7) and partner with athletic department (7). Newsletters, website, text messages, scheduling for attendance, and supplementary materials were all mentioned by fewer than half of the coaches interviewed.

Relationship Building. The final theme of fund-raising strategies was relationship building. The most common strategy for relationship building was special events, which nine coaches mentioned. Some examples were golf tournaments, tailgate parties, comedy shows, and youth wrestling events. Strategies for

Table 4

Coaches' Perceptions of Relationship Building Strategies to Enhance Giving in Olympic Sport Programs

Factor	Coaches Response (# of mentions)	Example
Special events	9	“We have golf tournaments, banquets with guest speakers, comedy shows and auctions.”
Face-to-face meeting	8	“I don’t think there was a person we sat down with that didn’t give.”
Make donors feel valued	8	“You have to make them feel important because they are important.”
Student-athlete interaction	8	“Go meet these kids. This money is not for the coaching staff. It’s for the 18-23 year olds.”
On-campus reunions	7	“The most important thing is getting alumni to come back to campus.”
Provide info on expenses	7	“I broke down what it costs for shoes, singlets, pads, everything, for each person on team.”
Know donors (personal level)	6	“You have to take personal interest, kind of like recruiting. You have to get to know them”
Personal phone calls	6	“We have a list of alumni that we target with individual phone calls.”
Personal letters	5	When donors receive a handwritten letter from an athlete, it means a lot.”
Work ethic	4	“There are creative things you can do to raise money, but bottom line is you have to work at it.”

relationship building emerged and included face to face meetings with donors, student-athlete and donor interaction, and making donors feel valued (by valuing them through all interactions) were strategies for relationship building mentioned by eight coaches. Four other elements (on campus reunions, providing information on expenses, personal phone calls, and getting to know donors on a personal level) were each discussed by at least six coaches. The only two strategies not mentioned by a majority of coaches were personal letters and work ethic.

Discussion

Connection

When focusing on the unique challenges facing men's NCAA wrestling programs, it is clear that coaches must be proactive in their approach to position their programs moving forward. Given that program elimination is based on administrator decisions (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Weight & Cooper, 2011), it is important that coaches find ways to add value to their respective athletic departments. Being considered a peripheral unit from a financial standpoint, there is strong demand for coaches to enhance the economic support surrounding their program (Weight, 2010). Thus, the ability to effectively engage in fund-raising is a necessary skill set for wrestling coaches in today's intercollegiate athletic environment.

As demonstrated in previous literature, a fund-raiser's main function is to increase funding by identifying and cultivating a key constituency surrounding a program (Leonhardt, 2011). The results of this study provide a clear blueprint for the basic reasons why people give and the strategies being used to cultivate and steward donors to NCAA wrestling programs. There are two groups that coaches need to focus their efforts on: alumni and wrestling fans. Alumni appear to be the most important, especially in terms of fund-raising. Their motivation ties in with Gladden, Mahony and Apostolopoulou's (2005) research, which identified helping student-athletes and repaying the university as the primary motivations for giving to athletics. Coach #8 spoke to this motivating factor, when he said alumni "want to be able to provide the same type of opportunities they had as an athlete."

Wrestling fans, as well as high school coaches, are great targets for attendance and marketing efforts, but the coaches surveyed appeared to not have focused their fund-raising efforts on these groups. Coach #7 mentioned that he primarily asks the local wrestling community to "support us by putting their butt in the seat. When the administration comes in and sees 1,000 people in the arena for our match, that's as powerful as someone writing a \$50,000 check." Coach #4 echoed this sentiment and mentioned he convinced his administration to let all the gate receipts from every home wrestling match go directly back into the wrestling budget. This strategy allows them to see immediate benefits when bringing in the local wrestling community to matches. Creative methods like Coach #4 described help wrestling fans contribute to the success of a wrestling program without the coach having to specifically ask them for private donations.

Belief in Program

One of the most important elements for a fund-raiser is to have a strategic plan that supports the mission of the organization while drawing in constituencies based on key program areas (Lowman & Bixby, 2011). These objectives are clearly influenced by three sub-categories that emerged within the belief in program theme: return on investment, coach as leader, mission of the program. However, seven different coaches each mentioned two of the three sub-categories in their interviews. Based on the responses, it appears that the belief in program is a critical factor for potential donors. Ultimately, the subcategories may be too intertwined for it to be appropriate to separate them in future studies. The following quote from Coach #6 sums up the interplay between these factors:

“This is going to sound so cliché, but people give to people, they don’t give to ideas. I think the bottom line is whenever you feel like you have a guy that wants to help, you have to prove to this guy that you are worth it. He has to believe in you. He’s got to buy in to you, who you are, what your mission statement is, what your vision is for the program and can he trust that you have the stones to get it done.”

Customer Service

If alumni are the primary source of fund-raising for wrestling programs, coaches need to learn how to bring their former wrestlers into the fold and make them feel like they are still an important part of the program after their wrestling careers are over. The results of this study provide coaches with a few specific, yet simple strategies to implement. Since service quality has been found to impact donor longevity (Sargeant, 2001) and donor satisfaction (Shapiro, 2010), the most common things the coaches in this study did to maximize service quality were maintain a contact database, be in constant communication, provide specific giving options and write thank you notes when contributions were received. Constant communication is absolutely vital, as every coach spoke of its importance:

Whether it’s through e-mails, newsletters, Facebook, phone conversations, or meetings, that’s really the key: communication. We make our alumni feel, and rightfully so, like a part of the program. And we give them ownership in our program. So that it’s not my problem, it’s our problem” (Coach #1).

The easiest way to maintain constant communication with current and potential donors is to maintain a contact database, something that even the smallest organizations can use to track their donors and their preferences (Sargeant, 2001). Coach #10 said that every person he meets, he gets a business card or e-mail address to include in his database. Coach #2 saves every e-mail address from every

e-mail he or one of his coaches receives about the program. Collecting contact information and maintaining a database isn't difficult, but it does require time and energy. "A lot of it is tedious—data entry, always being on the lookout, updating e-mails, asking people for their business card. It takes hard work" (Coach #8). In essence, it is the process of "relationship fund-raising" coined initially by Berry (1983).

Providing specific giving options to donors was emphasized by 9 of the 10 coaches in this study. The strategy behind these different options did vary, though. Some coaches discussed having annual contributions like membership dues in a club, so they have something that keeps them involved with the program, even if it's just \$25, which is what Coach #10 said membership in his Takedown Club costs. Other coaches discussed providing specific cost amounts for various expenses within their budget to donors so they can have a choice as to how much of a contribution they would like to make. One example of this strategy was Coach #8's "Equip A Wrestler" campaign, which provides exact costs for everything in his equipment budget and allowed donors to sponsor a wrestler for the year. A third example of a giving option was Coach #1's "Pin Pool." This campaign allowed donors to pledge to a certain amount of money for every time one of that school's wrestlers pinned an opponent. The campaign was beneficial in a variety of ways. First, it allowed donors to give at any level they wanted, whether it was \$1 or \$100. Second, it provided an opportunity for donors to increase giving without the coaches having to ask directly for more money. It also engaged the donors, as they would keep up with the matches more since it affected them directly. Ultimately, it increased the program's base of support and increased the amount of gifts the program was receiving.

Once a gift is received, an effective fund-raiser must recognize gifts of all kinds (Leonhardt, 2011). Nine of the 10 coaches interviewed all mentioned writing handwritten thank you notes whenever they received a gift. This strategy is simple, yet appears to have a profound affect on donors. There are other ways to thank donor, as six coaches also mentioned sending donors some form of a gift, but a thank-you note is vital to providing quality customer service. Coach #7 mentioned a small touch to add to thank you notes that he feels is important. "Anytime I talk to a donor, I take notes on family members, kids' names, dog names or anything that comes up," he said. "If I'm writing a letter and ask about their dog or their wife, it goes a long way." Ticket benefits, however, were not found to be a popular method of recognizing gifts, which contradicts Isherwood's (1986) findings, suggesting that donors to wrestling are not as motivated by tickets benefits as overall college athletics donors.

Marketing and Promotion

With constant communication being important to these coaches fund-raising efforts, it is also critical to know what they communicated and how it was communicated. These strategies fell under the theme of marketing and promotion.

The one strategy every coach discussed was providing regular updates on the program. These findings echo Sargeant's (2001) study which found lapsed donors did not believe the organizations provided adequate information and feedback. The methods by which coaches relayed these updates varied, but nine of the coaches reported using Facebook. Twitter was cited by six coaches, as was video. Interestingly, the program website was only mentioned by two of the coaches. The lack of use of the website could be a result of websites being less interactive (Olsen et al., 2001). Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter allow users to share information more readily than a traditional website, so the information posted on these sites can have a greater reach. Coach #2 made some interesting points about using videos as a means to communicate with donors. "It's a lot more personal. It is more eye-opening...they click on them and you're right there in their face and you're talking. So, they have a tendency to listen more."

Seven coaches also mentioned partnering with the athletic department as whole to better promote your program, and in turn increase fund-raising. These partnerships took many forms. Coach #7 discussed cross-marketing efforts with other sports at the institution which have a strong base of support in the local community. Coach #5 obtains tickets to a home football game and hosts a large tailgate for alumni to come back to and sit together at the game. Multiple coaches discussed the importance of the relationship with the institution's fund-raising department, whether it is just building a good relationship with their staff, attending meetings with the fund-raising board or setting up meeting with donors in conjunction with a staff member from the fund-raising department:

Reaching out for help is important. Not to raise money, but to help you with it. You can't do it all on your own. I really struggled with that, but in the last five years I've gotten people in the athletic department saying 'Coach, I want to help.' (Coach #10)

Relationship Building

In order to receive help from others, whether it's athletic department staff helping put on a banquet or donors making financial contributions, a fund-raiser must build relationships. Building meaningful relationships will lead to good will and increase the possibility of future gifts (Lowman & Bixby, 2011). The four most common strategies to build these relationships were face-to-face meetings, holding special events, providing opportunities for student-athlete interaction and making donors feel valued. Practically, all these strategies can be utilized in connection with each other. If a coach hosts an event the night before a match, he can meet with donors in person, have his wrestlers attend the event so they are able to meet the donors and providing this opportunity makes a donor feel valued. Since seven coaches also mentioned the importance of on-campus reunions, an event like this could encapsulate all these strategies to build relationships. Coach #4 provided a prime example of this type of event:

At every home match, our donors are allowed to use our lower club lounge where they have food and beverages available to them pre and post-match. I'll get in there post-match and thank them for their contributions. Basically, just interact with them and let them know where the program is headed.

When building a relationship, a coach needs to treat them as a friend and not just someone that can give them money. Having open lines of communication and not always asking for money allows donors to become more comfortable with the coach and "more often than not, they come to me asking what they can do" (Coach #1).

The three themes in fund-raising strategies correspond with the previous literature on fund-raising. Shapiro found that service quality positively affects donor satisfaction (2010), and the results of this study suggest customer service is a key strategy for wrestling coaches as well. Meanwhile, Weight's concept of "Complimentary Entre-lationship Promotion" touches on the need for promotion of wrestling by coaches as the primary advocate for their programs which translates nicely into the theme of marketing and promotion among the best fund-raisers. Finally, Burnett's call for "relationship fund-raising" (1992) is answered by these coaches as well, who spoke of the need for a personal relationship as vital to cultivating donors. Coach #3 enunciated this theme, saying, "I think what can help influence anyone to give is having a relationship. If you're just getting a letter once or twice a year asking for money, I don't think that's going to go as far as someone from the program reaching out to an individual and get to know them on a personal level." The clear message from these strategies is personal interaction with donors is necessary to build a relationship that will lead to a financial contribution. It's clearly been effective, as Coach #9 reported an incredible success rate: "We sent out a big letter which we got some response but we sat down with donors and talked one on one and that was the most effective. I don't think there was a person we sat down with that didn't give."

Unique Practices

By using qualitative research, this study was able to reach a greater depth of the understanding of fund-raising practices by wrestling coaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The common trends in strategies were evident, as previously discussed, but one of the reasons these 10 coaches were selected was their ability to innovate. The interviews provided an insight into some of the creative strategies that these coaches are using which are unique and could be instituted at other programs. One of these strategies was starting a PayPal account. Coach #9 said that opening a PayPal account made it easier for donors to give, as he could include a link in an email and someone can just make a quick donation while it is at the forefront of their thoughts. The ease at which a donor can make a donation is a key factor in their decision to give (Goecks et. al, 2008).

Coach #7 also had a unique way to combine customer service, marketing and relationship building strategies. Every summer, he gives each of his student-athletes ten names of donors and they each write handwritten letters to those donors. These letters allow the donors to hear directly from the individuals who are benefiting from the donor's gifts. By doing it in the summer, it reminds the donors about the wrestling program in the offseason, which helps them stay connected, even without match updates. It also builds the relationship between the program and donor because it is not a solicitation, merely a thank you with no action required on the donor's part.

Coach #10 instituted a special event that brings the wrestling community to his program's doorstep. His program hosts annual youth dual tournaments in their home arena. The Youth Duals, held in conjunction with a home meet, bring in 300 youth wrestlers to compete against each other and then stay to watch a college wrestling match. The event is free for youth wrestlers to participate in, and it brings in approximately 1,000 extra people to the match. The coach takes time before his meet to speak to the crowd, the current wrestlers officiate the Youth Duals and it exposes 300 youth and their families to his program. This event has led to increased fan support and increased donations. Coach #10 says,

It's one of the easiest ways to grow your program. You are increasing your fan base and getting more people involved. You are getting 1,000 parents involved and they want to be involved. They want to see the sport grow now that their son is in it.

Broad-Based Implications

For NCAA wrestling programs to ensure sustainability moving forward, it is important that coaches learn to increase their value to their athletic departments. As explained by Hackman (1985) in resource allocation theory, peripheral units like wrestling programs must focus their negotiation on broader institutional needs and bring in external resources that contribute to the whole to improve chances of being viable. Given the nature of college athletics, this is likely to be something that other Olympic sport programs will need to embrace moving forward. As explained by Weight (2010), "if a program were self-sustained, and/or had significant enough demand from the community to balance the resource allocation equation, then wrestling programs would never be cut" (p. 11). Thus, the pursuit to move towards an endowed model seems to be the only way to ensure sustainability, and coaches must embrace fund-raising initiatives to achieve this status.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to 10 NCAA Division I wrestling coaches. It would be useful to expand this to more wrestling coaches, especially to identify other

unique strategies being implemented at other programs that have proven to be successful. Due to the nature of semistructured interviews, there may be strategies used by these coaches which were not discussed. However, the results from this study could form a solid foundation for a survey instrument to be distributed among all NCAA Division I wrestling coaches. Discovering which of these strategies set these 10 coaches apart from the rest of their peers would provide guidance to coaches who are trying to raise money but are not being as successful. In addition, a case study of one of the 10 coaches could provide valuable information. Since the study focused exclusively on wrestling, future research should interview coaches from other non-revenue sports. The results from this study cannot be generalized to all non-revenue sports, but given the similarity between previous fund-raising literature and this study, it would not be surprising to find similar results.

Conclusions

Fund-raising is not easy. It requires hard work, organization and energy to constantly be on the lookout for people and businesses that can help your program. However, it is an essential skill for a wrestling coach in the current economic environment facing college athletics. When viewed through the lens of Resource Allocation Theory, wrestling is a peripheral unit in an athletic department. Under this theory, in order to receive additional funding from the athletic department, the coach would need to convince his athletic director that those additional resources would benefit the entire athletic department. Unfortunately, that is a tough sell. Therefore, coaches need to find other ways to generate money and fund-raising is their best option. For many coaches, fund-raising is likely not their best skill, but it is something you can develop with practice. Coach #10 spoke about his program's philosophy of "One More." Everyone in their program—coaches, student-athletes and donors—are asked to give One More. While they may not have a formal philosophy like Coach #10, all wrestling coaches ask their student-athletes to push themselves. The coaches need to heed their own advice and push themselves to become better fund-raisers or they face the prospect of program elimination. Coach #1 summed up the pressure to raise money on wrestling coaches the best. "You can't be just a technician these days if you expect to be a successful coach. You need to embrace fund-raising and marketing programs or, in a lot of places, you won't have a program."

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Management Whitepaper

Strategies Implemented by Top NCAA Olympic Coaches to Enhance Support Surrounding Their Programs

Lee Roberts, Coyte G. Cooper, Erianne A. Weight

I. Research Problem

The purpose of the study was to explore fundraising practices of top NCAA Division I wrestling coaches ($N = 10$) to determine strategies that programs can implement to encourage sustainability initiatives. Given the unique “profit maximization” nature of college athletics at the Division I level, the study was designed to identify basic practices that all coaches can implement to enhance the support surrounding their programs. The themes and subcategories identified in the research are discussed to provide a foundation for coaches who are interested in implementing fund-raising initiatives of their own. The implications also impact athletic departments who make the decision to proactively support their Olympic sport programs.

II. Issues

The elimination of wrestling programs has been studied on a few occasions, with all surveying athletic directors to determine the reasons these programs were being cut (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Weight & Cooper, 2011; Williamson, 1983). Williamson concluded that the top reasons wrestling programs were discontinued were lack of student interest, high cost, lack of recruitable prospects, and lack of spectator appeal. In 1995, Gray and Pelzer conducted a follow-up study and determined that conference alignment, shifting resources, inconvenient travel, and cost were the primary reasons for eliminating wrestling programs. Similarly, Weight and Cooper (2011) sought to build upon the previous research of athletic director decisions to eliminate nonrevenue sports through a mixed methods approach that utilized a multiple embedded case study and a survey. When comparing the responses between coaches and athletic directors, the budget shortage factor was significantly more important to athletic directors than the coaches. Based on these results, Weight and Cooper argue that coaches need to place a higher emphasis on the ability to increase revenues realized by their program during the season.

III. Summary

This research was pursued through the use of qualitative research to examine the best fund-raising practices among the 10 most effective NCAA wrestling coach

fundraisers, as determined by the executive director of the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA). The executive director of the NWCA collects data regarding all NCAA wrestling programs, including their structure, budgets, and fund-raising amounts per year. Following the semistructured interviews with the top coaches, the data was coded to identify top fund-raising trends in the Olympic sport environment. Overall, the results demonstrated that coaches should invest in a connection with key stakeholders by investing in constant communication and the implementation of the following strategies: specific giving campaigns, regular recognition of support, and the provision of regular program updates. Other specific effective strategies are discussed in the paper.

IV. Analysis

With the challenges facing Olympic coaches in sports such as men's wrestling, it is essential that coaches develop skills that allow them to enhance support surrounding their program. When viewed through the lens of Resource Allocation Theory, wrestling is a peripheral unit in an athletic department. Under this theory, in order to receive additional funding from the athletic department, the coach would need to convince his athletic director that those additional resources would benefit the entire athletic department. Therefore, coaches need to find other ways to generate money and fund-raising is their best option. For many coaches, fund-raising is likely not their best skill, but it is something that can be developed with practice through the strategies demonstrated in this research.

V. Discussion/Implications

In the future, it is essential that coaches are proactive in their pursuit to enhance the sustainability of their programs. To maximize the potential of this occurring, coaches must invest in strategies that enhance support surrounding their programs. While there are a variety of steps that are essential to this process, developing a strong fund-raising plan is one of the first initial steps that coaches should consider when attempting to build their program. Similarly, for athletic departments who want to ensure that Olympic programs are sustainable, there needs to be an emphasis on educating coaches on how to best grow their programs moving forward. These strategies are outlined in the paper.