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Bridging the gap: The perceptions of athletic directors and coaches regarding nonrevenue program discontinuation decisions

Erianne A. Weight & Coyte G. Cooper

KEYWORDS:

NCAA, program eliminations, men's wrestling, athletic director decisions

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of athletic directors and coaches regarding wrestling program discontinuation decisions. In the past few decades, an alarming number of NCAA men's wrestling programs have been eliminated throughout the United States (Student-athlete, 2006). Historically, the educational value offered through intercollegiate athletics was enough to justify financial funding of these programs; however, the marked trend toward the discontinuation of sports that are nonrevenue in nature support the notion that this justification may no longer be sufficient in today's big-time intercollegiate athletic environment. In order to ensure the sustainability of programs that do not have the financial lure of big-time football and basketball, it is essential for primary program advocates (coaches) to understand the criteria employed by athletic directors when eliminating these programs. Utilizing a multiple-embedded case study (n = 4) with the use of survey, athletic directors (n = 20) and wrestling head coaches (n = 24) of Football Bowl Subdivision universities who have sponsored wrestling within the past ten years were studied in order to explore perceptions regarding the criteria utilized in program-termination decisions. Findings suggest that athletic directors utilize budget shortages and financial strain of the program as primary discontinuation criteria followed by gender equity implications, success on the mat, and regional sport popularity. In contrast, the coaches indicated they felt gender equity, regional sport popularity, donor support, athletes' actions off the mat, and athletes' academic performance were the primary reasons for program eliminations. Thus, the results illustrated that athletic directors and coaches had varying perceptions for the reasons why nonrevenue programs such as men's wrestling are eliminated. The study provides a unique opportunity to understand the underlying reasons why men's wrestling programs are eliminated, and what coaches of nonrevenue sports might do to sustain their programs.

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Introduction

In the past few decades, an alarming number of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) wrestling programs have been eliminated by athletic administrators (Student-athlete, 2006). From 1981 to 2005, the number of men's wrestling teams sponsored within the NCAA dropped significantly from 363 to 234 programs (Student-athlete, 2006). Astoundingly, during the 24-year time frame,

there was not one year of positive net change realized by college wrestling (Student-athlete, 2006). This trend of program discontinuation does not appear to be slowing as eighteen programs have been eliminated throughout the 2007-08 and 2008-09 academic years alone (Frauenheim & Skoda, 2008; Moyer, personal interview, January 26, 2009).

With the torrent of program eliminations that have occurred, supporters of college wrestling

and other suffering “nonrevenue” sports have voiced concerns about the elimination process. In response to the program losses, many have targeted Title IX and the proportionality prong as the primary reason for men’s program eliminations (Abbott, 2005; Dodd, 2002). Considering the fact that the “safe harbor” of proportionality is a distant reality for many athletic departments in the United States (NCAA, 2003), advocates of college wrestling have explained there is a significant chance the trend will continue in future years because athletic directors have illustrated a preference to eliminate men’s nonrevenue sport teams rather than creating new participation opportunities for women (Gable, 2004; Schlafy, 2004).

Other research does not entirely support the notion that these cuts have been conducted in an effort to expand opportunities for women, but rather the decisions to eliminate men’s nonrevenue teams has occurred primarily because athletic departments act as profit-maximizers in today’s intercollegiate sport environment, placing each dollar toward sports that have the greatest likelihood of bringing in revenue for the athletic department (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar; 2003, Weight, 2010). Scholars have explained that program eliminations are due to irresponsible spending by athletic administrators on men’s basketball and men’s football in an effort to keep up with the “arms race” that is taking place at the Division I-A level (James & Ross, 2004; Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Suggs, 2001, 2003). Capturing this premise, Leland and Peters (2003) argued,

The real expenses starving minor men’s sports funding are the disproportionate share of university athletic dollars spent on one or two teams - football and men’s basketball - and not spent to add new teams for women or to support other men’s sports. Title IX should not be the scapegoat for irresponsible nonprofit institutions of higher education that operate

their football and men’s basketball programs like professional franchises (p. 4).

With a variety of different perceptions on program elimination decisions (Abbott, 2005; Dodd, 2002; Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Suggs, 2003), there is a growing need to understand the reasons why athletic directors eliminate programs in intercollegiate athletics. If men’s wrestling programs are going to be sustainable in future years, it is imperative that primary program advocates have a clear understanding of why athletic directors discontinue sport programs so that they are able to develop strategies to fortify their programs. Thus, the purpose of the current research was to explore the perceptions of athletic directors and coaches regarding wrestling program discontinuation decisions.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this study is based upon organizational justice research. This line of inquiry has significantly evolved throughout the past fifteen years, and much of this work has been developed through the same populace of interest as researched within this study - intercollegiate athletics.

Distributive justice involves the perceived fairness of outcomes such as resource distributions and allocations. Individuals within organizations may examine input and outcome ratios for themselves and others. If the outcomes (in the form of monetary and/or other forms of compensation) are viewed as equal based on the level of input, they are considered fair—those who receive the most rewards are those who contribute the most to the organization (Adams, 1965). Sources of contribution have been identified as productivity, effort, and ability (Tornblom & Jonsson, 1985). Specific research in the field of sport management has further identified revenue production and spectator appeal

as prime sources of contribution within an intercollegiate athletic department (Mahony, Hums, Andrew, & Dittmore, 2010; Mahony & Pastore, 1998, Hums & Chelladurai, 1994; Mahony, Riemer, Breeding, & Hums, 2006).

This research provides a very applicable lens through which we may examine the phenomenon of discontinuation decisions. The topic of interest in this study is the rationale utilized by athletic directors and coaches' perceptions of administrative rationales in making resource allocation decisions. In the distributive justice framework, we are exploring the input/outcome method of allocations founded in a retribution model – i.e. what inputs might predicate an outcome of sport discontinuation. Further, the researchers are responding to a suggestion posed by Mahony et al. (2010) by continuing research in the organizational justice literature through an examination of how perceptions of justice might impact organizations – in this case, how differences between coach and athletic director resource allocation views may affect the functionality of departments of intercollegiate athletics.

Literature Review

In order to shed light onto the reasons for program eliminations, several scholars have surveyed athletic directors in order to explore the underlying reasons why athletic departments eliminate nonrevenue sport programs (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Williamson, 1983). In a pioneering study on nonrevenue program eliminations, Williamson (1983) surveyed athletic directors and concluded that the discontinuations of sport programs were most influenced by the following factors: (1) lack of student interest, (2) high cost, (3) lack of recruitable prospects, and (4) lack of spectator appeal. Similarly, in a follow-up study, Gray and Pelzer (1995) demonstrated overlapping

trends when reporting that the following factors had the most significant influence on athletic director's decisions to eliminate nonrevenue programs: (1) conference alignment, (2) shifting resources, (3) inconvenient travel, (4) cost, (5) lack of spectators, and (6) lack of student interest.

In addition to the previous studies on program discontinuations, several scholars have voiced their opinions on the primary reasons for nonrevenue program eliminations (Carroll & Humphreys, 2000; Leland & Peters, 2003; Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003, Weight, 2010). Utilizing a nonprofit economic behavioral model, Carroll and Humphreys explored the effects that Title IX and gender equity regulations have on athletic administrators within a university setting. The model predicted “a decrease in the number of sport teams and a net decrease in the number of men's teams, suggesting that the regulation has unintended consequences” (2000, p. 359). Further, in addition to the existing women's program quality, the authors suggested size and prestige of the athletic program served as “important factors affecting the probability that men's sports teams were eliminated to comply with regulation” (2000, p. 359).

Building on previous research, in 2001, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) conducted a study to explore the underlying reasons why athletic directors eliminate nonrevenue programs (e.g., insufficient student interest, gender equity, resource allocations). Further, the GAO study added depth by examining the strategies universities had implemented to avoid program eliminations. In particular, when focusing on athletic programs between 1992 and 2000, the study showed 692 schools had added one or more intercollegiate athletic teams through “creative strategies to build athletic programs without discontinuing teams” (GAO, 2001, p. 25). For example, in addition to suggesting

strategies for revenue production (e.g., fundraising, renting athletic facilities, providing overflow parking for city events, and hosting events), the GAO study also illustrated the following cost containment approaches to avoid program eliminations: recruiting via telephone, replacing full-time faculty positions with a coach, limiting size of the football roster, and limiting team travel. Thus, the findings support the notion that some sort of entrepreneurial effort is linked to program protection in intercollegiate athletics.

Applying the ideas explored by the GAO study, Weight (2010) studied the idea of wrestling coaches acting as entrepreneurs for their programs. Athletic directors and wrestling coaches of Division I Football Bowl Subdivision institutions who sponsored wrestling were the sample of inquiry. Results indicated it is becoming the economic reality for programs that traditionally generate a negative cash flow to actively seek fan and donor support for the program in order to ensure its position as a sport offered by the athletic department. Specifically, coaches can enhance their program's chance of vitality through "complimentary entrepreneurship promotion," which Weight defines as "building indispensable relationships with donors, athletic department administrators, prominent figures, and alumni; fundraising; promoting their sport; and promoting the program's public perception" (Weight, 2010, p.27). This idea of a coach acting as the primary promoter of the program assumes a direct reward based on the input-output model of revenue/fan based funding. If, however, coaches are unaware of this standard being utilized, it leaves them in a significant disadvantage—a disadvantage that could potentially cost them their sport sponsorship within a particular institution.

Research in the distributive justice literature echoes many of the resource allocation themes discussed above, and provides further light into

how these decisions are justified and perceived as fair within organizations. Early studies within intercollegiate athletics identified need and equality of treatment as the most perceived equitable drivers of resource allocation decisions (Hums & Chelladurai, 1994; Mahony, Hums, & Reimer, 2002). "Need" was identified by the authors as being highly subjective. Follow-up studies confirmed the differing definitions of need being utilized, which included a) lack of resources available to a particular team, b) the high costs associated with a particular team, and c) the level of resources needed for a particular team to be competitively successful (Mahony, Hums, & Reimer, 2005).

Findings from a study conducted by Mahony and Pastore (1998) confirm the differing definitions of need as actually driving allocation decisions. Participation opportunities, revenues, and expenses at NCAA institutions over a 20 year period were examined. At Division I institutions, the primary allocation principles utilized were based on equity driven by revenue production and spectator appeal while the other divisions tended to use equality principles as their primary methods of resource distribution. Equality driven decisions were motivated more by legislation (i.e. Title IX) than by a true belief of fairness. The results of this study demonstrated the bulk of allocations directed toward men's revenue producing sport, followed by women's sports who receive sufficient resources to comply with Title IX regulations, followed by men's nonrevenue sports who receive minimal support. This theme was supported in subsequent studies which identified Division I institutions as being more likely to rate equity principles as fair—particularly when revenue production, a need to be competitively successful, and quantifiable scenarios were provided (Mahoney et al., 2002, 2005).

Previous research is extremely useful in providing a broad understanding of distributive

justice (Hums & Chelladurai, 1994; Mahoney et al. 2002, 2005; Mahony and Pastore, 1998). This study provides an advancement of the theoretical framework through an examination of perceptions of justice – in this case how differences between coach and athletic director resource allocation views may affect the functionality of departments of intercollegiate athletics. Further, we test the framework through application of the input/outcome model of allocations founded in a retribution representation – i.e., what inputs might predicate an outcome of sport discontinuation.

This study also builds upon the research related to athletic director decisions to eliminate nonrevenue sport programs (GAO, 2001; Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Williamson, 1983). Each of the previous studies that examined discontinuation decisions are over nine years old, thus the data is not necessarily representative of the decisions being made by athletic directors in today's competitive environment. Further, in relation to the current study, the results are not specific to the reasons why athletic directors have chosen to eliminate men's wrestling programs. The current research attempted to add depth to this research by studying athletic directors and coaches in an effort to build a greater understanding of the perceptions surrounding program termination from both an administrative and stakeholder viewpoint. Based on a review of related literature, the following research questions were created to guide the study.

Research Question 1: What are the criteria used by Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) athletic directors to justify wrestling program terminations?

Research Question 2: What are the criteria FBS wrestling coaches believe is being used to justify wrestling program terminations?

Research Question 3: How do FBS athletic directors and wrestling coaches differ in their views regarding sport termination decisions?

Methodology

The research was conducted through the use of a mixed-methods approach—an empirical case study featuring a multiple embedded case study with the use of the survey. The method was chosen because the case study is “the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p. 1). The multiple embedded case study was used to garner in-depth views within individual programs, and the survey methodology was utilized to gain wide-spread quantitative data for analysis and triangulation purposes.

Case Studies

In designing the study, case study methodology was strictly followed in an effort to maintain rigor. In order to obtain rich data, the case study data collection method involved the use of interviews, on-site observations, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted utilizing pre-structured questions that were asked during phone calls and in-person visits. The primary sample for the case study research included the coaching staffs of two successful Big Ten wrestling institutions. During the data collection process, in addition to thoroughly reviewing literature related to each programs, the head coach and their staff were also interviewed and observed on multiple occasions. Additionally, to add depth to the research, the athletic directors from each of the two universities were interviewed as well as a leader of a major national wrestling association, and a Big Ten athletic director who has actively

been a supporter of college wrestling.

Within the qualitative portion of the study, validity and reliability were addressed. To enhance construct validity, the following sources were triangulated to establish a chain of evidence: survey data, interviews, observations, and document analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1998). Within the telephone surveys and case interviews, member checking was utilized to ensure a thorough understanding of uncertain responses. Further, in order to address validity, between-case pattern matching and explanation building was used to enhance internal validity. The study also employed theory and multiple cases to augment external validity.

Surveys

Two separate surveys were generated and utilized during the study. In order to assess the validity of the instrument, a panel of the following experts was formed to review the survey items: three athletic directors, four coaches, two survey specialists, and three sport management professors. Based on the panel's suggestions and a review of related literature (Mahony et al., 2005, GAO, 2001; Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Williamson, 1983), 19 potential elimination criteria items were included on the survey. Validity checks on the 19 items were conducted during the case study interviews among each of the selected athletic directors and coaches. The items required respondents to rate the importance of the decision-making process surrounding program discontinuation utilizing a 5-point likert scale. Because of the rigorous schedule of these hard-to-reach coaches and administrators, survey questions were kept to a minimum in hopes of garnering a larger response rate. For this reason, fundamental reliability tests were not included in the instrument. Follow-up interviews with eight respondents, however, assessed test-retest reliability when respondents were asked if they would alter any of their responses. None

of the respondents changed any of their initial responses providing some evidence for instrument reliability.

After the instrument had been reviewed and finalized, surveys were distributed via email to the entire population of FBS wrestling coaches. The initial response rate from coaches was 15 (36.6%), but after follow-up phone calls were made to the coaches who did not respond to the email, an additional nine surveys were completed for a final response rate of 24 (58%). The second survey was distributed not only to the athletic directors at FBS schools sponsoring men's wrestling, but to eight athletic directors who had eliminated their wrestling program in the past ten years. Similar to the coaches survey, the initial response rate was 16 (34%), but an additional four questionnaires were gathered through follow-up emails for a final response rate of 20 (41%).

Descriptive statistics were generated for scale items (see Table 3). In addition, the authors utilized one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) via SPSS 15.0 to examine the variance in means between the sample of coach and athletic director respondents. Power analysis was utilized to determine the probability of detecting a "true" effect. Computed power for our sample sizes was .952 (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Athletic Director Discontinuation Criteria

Based on the responses by the athletic directors who participated in the study, the results illustrate that the following factors had the highest influence on the decisions to eliminate wrestling programs: (1) departmental budget shortages resulting from decreases in institutional support, donor support, or revenue ($M = 3.70$; $SD = 0.98$); (2) financial strain of the individual program ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.09$); gender equity implications ($M = 3.60$;

SD =1.47); (4) history of success on the mat (M = 3.45; SD =1.05); and (5) regional sport popularity (M = 3.40; SD =1.19).

Further, in addition to the most influential reasons, there were several other criteria that were notable in the study (see Table 1).

When focusing on the remaining data, the results also illustrate the criteria with little influence on athletic director's decisions to

eliminate wrestling programs. Overall, the findings support the notion that the following factors have the lowest influence on athletic director's decisions: (1) personal relationship with coach (M = 1.80; SD = 1.11); (2) tenure of coach with University (M = 2.25; SD = 1.25); (3) budget shortage due to overspending (M = 2.55; SD = 1.32); (4) regional coach popularity (M = 2.60; SD = 1.19); and (5), lack

Table 1
Differences Between Athletic Directors (n=20) Cutting Criteria and Coaches (n=24) Perceptions of Criteria

Criteria	AD Means	AD Standard Deviations	Coach Means	Coach Standard Deviations	p
Budget shortage due to budget cuts	3.70	0.98	2.96	1.30	0.042*
Financial strain of program	3.60	1.09	2.96	1.20	0.073
Gender equity implications	3.60	1.47	3.71	1.49	0.810
Success on the mat	3.45	1.05	3.00	1.35	0.232
Regional Sport Popularity	3.40	1.19	3.38	1.24	0.949
Donor Support	3.40	1.39	3.38	1.21	0.949
Athlete Academic Achievement	3.25	1.21	3.04	1.30	0.588
Fan Support	3.20	1.32	3.04	1.16	0.674
Conference membership requirements	3.15	1.39	3.04	1.46	0.803
Educational Value of Sport	3.10	1.16	2.5	1.56	0.163
Athlete Actions off the mat	3.00	1.26	3.38	1.31	0.342
Olympic sport popularity	3.00	1.17	2.88	1.15	0.724
National sport popularity	2.90	0.91	2.79	1.22	0.744
Requirements of NCAA classification	2.80	1.28	2.92	1.47	0.783
Lack of facilities	2.70	1.22	2.13	0.99	0.092
Regional coach popularity	2.60	1.19	2.79	1.28	0.613
Budget shortage due to overspending	2.55	1.32	2.88	1.23	0.402
Tenure of coach with university	2.25	1.25	2.79	1.02	0.121
Personal relationship with coach/AD	1.80	1.11	3.04	1.20	0.001**

* p<.05

**p<.01

of facilities ($M = 2.70$; $SD = 1.22$). Further, of all the items included in the survey, the “personal relationship with coach” factor was the only criteria where no athletic director listed the item as critically important.

Coaches Perceptions of Criteria for Program Discontinuation

In an effort to fully understand the men’s wrestling program eliminations, coaches were also surveyed on their perceptions of athletic director’s criteria for program discontinuations. As shown in Table 1, the answers provided by coaches varied a great deal from the criteria responses afforded by athletic directors. When focusing on the descriptive data, the results demonstrate that coaches feel that the following criteria were the most common reasons for program eliminations: (1) gender equity ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 1.49$), (2) regional sport popularity ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.24$), (3) donor support ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.21$), (4) athletes’ actions off the mat ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.31$), and (5) athletes’ academic performance ($M = 3.04$; $SD = 1.30$).

The analysis of the remaining data also identifies the criteria that coaches felt had the least influence on athletic director’s decisions to eliminate men’s wrestling programs. Overall, the findings reveal that coaches believed that the following five criteria had little or no influence on athletic director’s decisions to discontinue the programs: (1) lack of facilities ($M = 2.13$; $SD = 0.99$), (2) educational value of sport ($M = 2.50$; $SD = 1.56$), (3) tenure of coach at University ($M = 2.79$; $SD = 1.02$), (4) regional coach popularity ($M = 2.79$; $SD = 1.28$), and (5) national sport popularity ($M = 2.79$; $SD = 1.28$). The remaining criteria responses are provided in Table 1.

Differences in Athletic Directors Responses and Coaches Perceptions

In order to examine the differences between athletic directors and coaches responses, a

One-way ANOVA was conducted. The results demonstrate that the samples differed significantly ($p < .05$) within two of the categories, and two other factors approached significance ($p < .10$). As shown in Table 1, athletic directors felt the following three factors were more important in the elimination process than coaches: budget shortage due to budget cuts ($p < .05$), financial strain of program ($p < .10$), and the lack of facilities ($p < .10$). Further, the data supports the notion that coaches overvalued their personal relationship with the athletic director ($p < .001$).

Athletic Directors Explanations for Program Eliminations

The in-depth interviews provided additional insight into the specific criteria that athletic directors implement when eliminating nonrevenue sport programs. As shown in Table 2, a large majority of the responses from athletic directors dealt with the financial aspect of intercollegiate athletics, and the ability to balance budgets in a competitive environment. In particular, one athletic director referenced the “arms race” as a potential reason for program elimination when stating the following:

I strongly believe that the financial aspect of college sports today, especially at the Division I-A level, is the major factor in the elimination of men’s sports. And with that financial factor comes the arms race that exists in football especially, and the need to stay up with your counterparts because of the revenue generation of those particular sports...It’s because of those dollars, that all Olympic sports, quite frankly, not just men’s sports are being challenged (Athletic Director 3).

In addition to the financial aspect, the athletic directors also illustrated a range of personal

criteria that are important when eliminating men's wrestling programs. While the criteria were unique to each individual, the athletic directors mentioned the following criteria: conference requirements, popularity of sport in region, and success of sport team. Thus, while the financial requirements seem somewhat stable, there are varying responses provided by athletic directors depending on their priorities within their athletic departments. In particular, one athletic director summed up this theme best when explaining the following:

Hopefully, we make decisions for the, quote, right reasons. I know whenever you make harming decisions, meaning decisions that negatively impact student-athletes programs, there is always strict analysis as to why and what affect it might have. I think all of the reasons [on the list] go into decision-making, some of them more so for each of us as individuals (Athletic Director 2).

Discussion

The understanding of athletic director's criteria for program eliminations is critical for a variety of different reasons. During the past thirty years, men's college wrestling has

suffered more program eliminations than any other sport (Student-athlete, 2006). Because the landscape of college athletics is unlikely to change in the future (James & Ross, 2004), wrestling coaches must understand the reasons why nonrevenue programs are being eliminated by athletic directors. While the understanding of criteria does not guarantee program survival, it does provide wrestling programs with the ability to understand what athletic directors value most. Thus, as a result, college wrestling coaches can attempt to maximize the sustainability of their program through directed team efforts (Weight, 2010).

From a broad standpoint, the identification of the athletic directors' primary criteria for program elimination allows men's wrestling programs to understand the reasons why their programs are cut (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Williamson, 1983). In essence, this provides a unique opportunity for programs to make necessary adjustments to avoid future program eliminations. For example, when coaches know that donor support is a primary criterion, then they can potentially develop strategies to increase financial support to the program. A primary example of this involves the coach's creation of a database of former athletes and supporters who may be willing to support

Table 2

Athletic Directors Reasons for Program Eliminations (Interview Responses)

	Key Criteria Responses
Athletic Director 1	High cost of funding nonrevenue sports Title IX issues – proportionality compliance Popularity of sport in region
Athletic Director 2	Making fair decisions for student-athletes Less emphasis on athletic success Conference requirements
Athletic Director 3	Keeping up with “arms race” Balancing budget Emphasis on athletic success

their program. With a combination of creative entertainment outings hosted by the program, coaches could increase donations in an effort to enhance the revenues realized by their program. Ultimately, this could potentially allow programs to “pay the rent” that is necessary for them to remain viable at the intercollegiate level (Weight, 2010).

Similar to previous studies (Gray & Pelzer, 1995; Mahony et al., 2005; Williamson, 1983), an additional criterion that athletic directors utilize when making program elimination decisions is the fan support of the team. Unlike gender equity issues, the identification of fan support as a key criterion is critical because it is a factor that coaches can potentially control. For example, coaches have the opportunity to enhance attendance at their events through cross-promotional efforts at events such as summer wrestling camps. Additionally, when coaches utilize creative promotional strategies such as free clinics prior to dual meets, they significantly increase the chance that younger wrestlers and families will attend their events. Similarly, they also provide a strong case for enhanced fan loyalty among wrestling fans attending their clinics.

Following the recognition of criteria with favorable responses, the research also provides additional depth through the identification of criteria with low mean values. Similar to the favorable criteria, the understanding of criteria with low importance allows coaches to spend more time on factors with potential influences on the long-term sustainability of their program. For example, understanding that personal relationships are not important to athletic directors allows coaches to spend less time attempting to win over athletic directors. Instead, the coach can spend his time attempting to increase regional popularity through appearances at local tournaments. Additionally, the coach can spend an increasing amount of time training athletes on and off

the mat so their program realizes more success in areas that are more important to athletic directors.

In addition to the identification of elimination criteria, the research also utilized interviews with athletic directors to better understand reasons why programs are cut. When asked to evaluate the descriptive mean criteria values provided in Table 1, the athletic directors who were interviewed disagreed with the high values attached to the following criteria: success on the mat and conference affiliation. While the athletic directors differed in the level of agreement with the criteria, the results of the variations were clear: each athletic director can have unique criteria they turn to when deciding whether or not to eliminate a program. Thus, in order to ensure their programs are safe, wrestling coaches must utilize the previous results to understand the criteria each of their athletic directors uses when deciding whether or not to eliminate programs. The variation in athletic director responses supports the notion that equality-based resource allocation based on “need” is highly subjective (Mahony et al., 2005), as several previously referenced sources of need identified in previous studies were cited by athletic directors as potential drivers of resource allocation decisions.

Implications of Varying Responses

In an effort to enhance the understanding of criteria for program eliminations, the current study also implemented a one-way ANOVA to determine the differences in responses between athletic directors and coaches. Overall, the results confirmed that athletic directors placed significantly more value on the financial criteria than college coaches. The result is critical because it shows that wrestling coaches have an incomplete understanding regarding how athletic departments operate within today’s intercollegiate athletic environment.

This research provides further light into distributive justice research by exploring how discontinuation decisions are justified and perceived as fair (or unfair) within organizations. This study directly confirms the order of resource allocations uncovered by Mahony and Pastore (1998), where Division I institutions allocation decisions were based on equity driven by revenue production and spectator appeal. Overall, departmental budget cuts were cited as one of the primary drivers of program discontinuation, and these budgets pale in comparison to their revenue producing brother-sports. Also, Mahony and Pastore (1998) cited equality driven decisions were motivated more by legislation (i.e., Title IX) than by a true belief of fairness – and this belief was echoed by the coaches and athletic directors.

This study also provides an advancement of the distributive justice theoretical framework through an examination of perceptions of justice – in this case how differences between coach and athletic director resource allocation views may affect the functionality of departments of intercollegiate athletics. Although the scope of this study did not directly measure how perceptions of justice might impact the organizations of focus, past work in the sport management literature has addressed distributive justice outcomes in the intercollegiate athletic (Andrew, Kim, Mahony, & Hums, 2009), recreation department (Jordan, Turner, & DuFord, 2007), and interscholastic sport (Whisenant, 2005) settings. These studies explored outcomes such as intentions to continue sport participation (Whisenant, 2005), job satisfaction (Jordan et al, 2007), and affective organizational commitment and organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Andrew et al, 2009). Based on the findings in this study, a theoretical leap could be taken toward a proposal that the differing views on

how the discontinuation decisions are made may create some tension at the tactical level. This tension might seep down into the day-to-day actions of coaches as they strive to fight for the sustainability of their sport. If they do not understand the criteria being utilized, or if they do not feel the criteria is fair, this certainly affects the functionality of the department. If college coaches want to retain their wrestling programs, the results suggest that they need to place a higher emphasis on the ability to increase revenues realized by their program during the season. As previously mentioned, there are several cross-promotional strategies that coaches can implement in an effort to achieve this objective.

In addition to the financial implications, the results also confirmed that athletic directors and coaches provided significantly different responses to the relationship with coach criteria. Again, the difference shows that coaches do not fully understand the criteria athletic directors use when eliminating programs. To realize their full potential within athletic departments, wrestling coaches must be aware of the criteria that athletic director's employ when making difficult program discontinuation decisions. When coaches are able to comprehend the influential criteria, they can react appropriately by allocating their time towards initiatives that are more conducive to favorable reviews by athletic directors.

Conclusions

While it may seem obvious that coaches need to develop fan support and financial support for their wrestling teams, not all coaches attach appropriate weight to these factors and the role they play in decisions about terminating sport programs. Additionally, while gender equity may play a role in the elimination of some male programs such as wrestling, athletic directors do not perceive this to be one of the primary or major reasons for termination.

In the future, it is crucial for wrestling coaches to find ways to enhance their team image in the eyes of their athletic directors. Further, coaches should work with advocate groups such as the National Wrestling Coaches Association (NWCA) and USA Wrestling to create feasible strategies to improve interest in the wrestling product at the regional level through grassroots efforts. After all, a majority of the important criteria outlined by athletic directors dealt directly or indirectly with the financial implications linked to smaller sport programs. With increased efforts in promotional strategies, wrestling coaches can lend their expertise towards enhancing consumption in the college wrestling product. With small promotional efforts at the grassroots level, coaches can garner support in their team from individuals at the local and regional levels.

In future years, scholars should continue to explore the impact of distributive justice perception discrepancies on relevant organizational outcomes through a variety of samples. Additionally, to take the next step towards program sustainability, researchers should attempt to develop tactics to address the concerns voiced by athletic directors. Furthermore, in addition to responding to basic athletic director concerns, future research on promotional strategies at wrestling events could develop additional interest that is necessary for long-term program success. Particularly, scholars should focus a great deal on creating segmented packages to increase attendance at dual meets and post-season tournaments.

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Journal of Sport Administration & Supervision

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS!

BRIDGING THE GAP: THE PERCEPTIONS OF ATHLETIC DIRECTORS AND COACHES REGARDING NONREVENUE PROGRAM DISCONTINUATION DECISIONS

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Research Problem

The purpose of the research was to examine the perceptions that athletic directors and coaches have regarding the reasons for program eliminations at the intercollegiate level. With the discontinuation of men's wrestling programs becoming a common occurrence at the NCAA Division I level, it is essential that coaches understand the reasons why athletic directors eliminate programs so they can enhance their business operations in future years. Further, it is also essential that athletic directors understand coaches' perceptions so that they can improve their working relationships within their athletic departments. This article is intended to serve as a guide to athletic directors and wrestling coaches looking to enhance program sustainability within college athletic departments.

Issues

During the past 30 years, men's wrestling and other nonrevenue sport teams have been discontinued at an alarming rate within NCAA athletic departments. With a growing emphasis on profit maximization at the Division I level, it is essential that college wrestling programs identify strategies to enhance their program sustainability. In order to achieve this objective, college wrestling coaches must understand the reasons why athletic directors eliminate nonrevenue sport programs. With an understanding of the program elimination criteria, coaches have the opportunity to engage in campaigns to improve their programs from a broad operational standpoint. Ultimately, this provides an opportunity for a "Win/Win" situation for both athletic directors and college wrestling coaches.

Summary

The results of the study illustrated the primary reasons why athletic directors eliminate nonrevenue sport teams. From a broad standpoint, the data demonstrated that athletic directors felt that budget shortages, financial strain of the program, gender equity implications, success on the mat, and regional sport popularity were the primary

reasons for eliminating wrestling programs. In contrast, the study also added value by investigating the reasons why coaches believed wrestling programs were eliminated. Overall, the coaches indicated that they felt that gender equity, regional sport popularity, donor support, athletes actions off the mat, and athletes academic performance were the primary reasons for program eliminations. Thus, the results illustrated that athletic directors and coaches had varying perceptions for the reasons why nonrevenue programs such as men's wrestling are eliminated.

Analysis

With an understanding of athletic director's program elimination criteria, coaches have the opportunity to implement business strategies to enhance their sustainability in coinciding athletic departments. For example, when coaches understand that regional sport popularity has an influence on their programs survival, they can engage in grassroots marketing efforts to improve consumer interest in their surrounding areas. Similarly, within this framework, they can implement innovative fundraising campaigns to increase the revenues realized by their program. Further, from an administrative standpoint, the results also allow athletic directors to understand the perceptions held by coaches regarding program eliminations. Thus, with these perceptions in mind, athletic directors are afforded with the opportunity to better communicate their organizational objectives with concerned coaches.

Discussions/Implications

The study provides a unique opportunity to understand the underlying reasons why men's wrestling programs are eliminated in NCAA athletic departments. With a clear reason why nonrevenue programs are discontinued, the National Coaches Wrestling Association (NWCA) and coaches can now implement grassroots strategies to enhance the sustainability of programs all across the United States. For example, the group can focus on developmental programs to encourage coaches to act like responsible CEO's within their respective programs. Further, the NWCA can engage in marketing-based research to enhance the promotional strategies implemented at the local, regional, and national levels. Ultimately, it is the understanding of athletic director's perceptions that affords the NWCA and college wrestling coaches an opportunity to effectively improve their operations in future generations.