Exploring Intercollegiate Athletic Department– Community Partnerships Through the Lens of Community Service Organizations

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education are increasingly engaging in partnerships with local communities. Within a sport context, the creation of the NCAA CHAMPS/Life Skills Program has emphasized partnerships between athletic departments and local community service organizations (CSOs). Prior studies, however, have used student-athletes rather than the partnership as the unit of analysis, so the attitudes and experiences of community partners remain overlooked. This study explored active relationships with a high-profile NCAA Division I athletic department in the Southeast through the lens of the CSOs. Four major themes emerged for the community partners' motives and perceived benefits in their relationship with the athletic department: (a) increased volunteer capacity, (b) opportunities to create long-term impact and lasting relationships with student-athletes, (c) ability to extend their mission through educational opportunities, and (d) monetary or in-kind donations. Overall, interviewees perceived their relationship with the athletic department to be characterized by ambiguity and ineffective communication.

Introduction

*I*nstitutions of higher education are increasingly engaging in partnerships with local community agencies. Universities have cultivated relationships with local communities since the mid-20th century, but more formalized structures and research investigating these partnerships have emerged only during the past 15 to 20 years *(Barnes et al., 2009; Cherry & Shefner, 2005).* Although most of this research has focused more broadly on institutions of higher education, Andrassy and Bruening (*2011*) highlighted an increased emphasis on partnerships between intercollegiate athletic departments and local community service organizations (CSOs) with the establishment of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) CHAMPS (Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success)/Life Skills Program. Within a sports context, research remains limited to studies using student-athletes as the unit of analysis rather than the partnership between the athletic

department and local community agencies *(Chalk, 2008; Gayles, Rockenbach, & Davis, 2012; Jarvie & Paule-Koba, 2013)*. A review of broader educational research suggests that the success of university–community partnerships largely depends on the planning and management of these relationships *(Baum, 2000; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Holland & Gelmon, 1998; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008)*. Barnes et al. (*2009*) noted, "Despite the development that has taken place in the collaborations between universities and communities, many challenges to creating meaningful and sustainable university–community partnerships remain" (*p.15*). Although scholars have devoted considerable attention to institutions of higher education, the attitudes and experiences of the local community partners remain underrepresented *(Blouin & Perry, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007)*. Research suggests that CSOs perceive a multitude of benefits from relationships with higher education institutions, including internal benefits of increased organizational capacity through volunteer engagement *(Blouin & Perry, 2009; Prentice & Garcia, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006)* and external benefits of increased visibility *(Gazley, Littlepage, & Bennett, 2012)*. Although research has focused on broad university–community partnerships, it is also important to examine CSO relationships with a unique department within institutions of higher education, the athletic department.

Given the need for exploring relationships between CSOs and specific departments within institutions of higher education, the purpose of the present study was to understand the perspectives and attitudes of community service organizations engaged in a partnership with a high-profile athletic department. We explored community partners' "perspectives on effective partnership characteristics as well as their own voices regarding the benefit, challenges, and motivations" *(Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 31)* of their relationship with an NCAA Division I football subdivision athletic department in the Southeast. By listening to the experiences of community partners, we can develop a better understanding of why nonprofit organizations engage in relationships with an athletic department by identifying perceived motives and benefits of these partnerships. Interviewing decision makers of CSOs also helps identify the perceived effectiveness of existing athletic department–community relationships. By understanding these partnerships through the lens of the community partners, we can begin to consider whether partnerships with a high-profile athletic department offer real benefits to CSOs. Before analyzing the findings of our qualitative inves-

tigation, however, it is appropriate to examine previous literature on university–community partnerships.

Literature Review

Two aspects of literature on university–community partnerships were adopted as the theoretical foundation for the present study. The first aspect concerned reasons for engagement in university–community partnerships through the lens of community partners. The second aspect of the theoretical framework for the present study was focused on characteristics of successful university–community partnerships. The present study considered athletic department–community partnerships using the partnership as the unit of analysis *(Cruz & Giles, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006)*.

Motives and Benefits of University–Community Partnerships

CSOs engage in university–community partnerships when the benefits of involving student volunteers outweigh the opportunity costs associated with the partnerships *(Alcantara, 2012; Budhai, 2013; Bushouse, 2005; Edwards, Mooney, & Heald, 2001; Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; Worrall, 2007)*. As noted by Gazley et al. *(2012)*, these benefits may be internal (e.g., improved program delivery) or external (e.g., increased organizational visibility) aspects of an organization. Overall, three major benefits perceived by community organizations emerge from existing literature: (a) increased organizational capacity, (b) enrichment, and (c) educational opportunities.

First, partnerships can increase the ability of a community organization to fulfill its goals and objectives *(Birdsall, 2005; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Gray et al., 2000; Prentice & Garcia, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Shaffett, 2002)*. Student volunteers can increase organizational capacity by providing additional human resources, which helps free up time for paid staff to devote to new projects *(Gazley et al., 2012; Nduna, 2007)*. In their national survey of community partners of universities involved in Learn and Serve America, Higher Education, Gray et al. *(2000)* found that more than 75% of participating agencies reported their partnerships had helped increase their ability to achieve organizational goals. Students' participation can also have a direct impact on the community partners' constituents through involvement with grassroots programs *(Edwards et al., 2001; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Gazley et al., 2012; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998; Gray et al., 2000; Jorge, 2003; Schmidt*

& Robby, 2002). In a study of the experiences of 30 community partners in a large urban setting in the United States, Ferrari and Worrall *(2000)* discovered that CSO staff members found students helpful through constructive relationships with their program constituents. At the same time, it is important to note that Tryon et al. *(2008)* found concerns among community partners regarding the potential negative impact of short-term service commitments on their constituents.

Second, university–community partnerships can enrich the local community organization through staff and organizational development. Previous research on the perspectives of community partners indicates that CSOs have increased their organizational capacity through partnerships with universities by learning new perspectives and information from student volunteers and gaining access to academic research *(Nduna, 2007; Sandy & Holland, 2006).* As noted by Sandy and Holland, some CSOs also value the prestige of the institution of higher education. Relationships with universities also appear to build social capital among CSOs in local communities, resulting in increased collaboration *(Boyle-Baise et al., 2001; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Foster, 2002).* As noted by Birdsall *(2005)*, partnering with an institution of higher education can serve CSOs as a tool for networking and building relationships with other community stakeholders.

Lastly, community organizations may engage in partnerships with higher education institutions for altruistic reasons *(Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Tryon et al., 2008).* For example, some community organizations have reported engaging in university–community partnerships due to a desire or sense of responsibility to educate the public *(Dorado & Giles, 2004; Shaffett, 2002; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008).* In their exploratory study of the perspectives of 99 community partners in California, Sandy and Holland *(2006)* found that educating students was a strong motive for their partnership with an institution of higher education. Tryon and Stoecker *(2008)* also found that some CSOs viewed their experience with student volunteers as an opportunity to generate interest in future careers in the nonprofit sector.

It is important to note, however, that organizational motives can change over the course of a partnership. A study by Worrall *(2007)* suggested that many organizations initially engaged in university–community partnerships to increase their volunteer capacity. Over time, however, their reasons for involvement changed as they often began to see themselves as educational partners of the university. The potential change of reasons for continued involvement raises

questions about what structural aspects of the partnership community organizations consider essential for long-term sustainability.

Characteristics of Effective University–Community Partnerships

Successful university–community partnerships have common characteristics that allow both parties to receive benefits from their relationship. Based on involvement with national initiatives, Holland and Gelmon *(1998)* suggested that sustainable partnerships share several common characteristics, including mutually agreed-upon goals and a shared vision of how to evaluate the partnership. Scholarship on university–community partnerships, however, highlights the challenges in developing sustainable university–community partnerships due to the complex nature of these relationships *(Dorado & Giles, 2004; Maurrasse, 2002; Strier, 2011)*. Strier *(in press)* argued that stakeholders involved in these university–community relationships need to accept the complexity and develop strong skills in managing tensions and conflict for advancing the collaboration. A mutually beneficial university–community partnership includes a strong fit between the community organization and the university and a clear understanding of the partnership's goals and objectives *(Baum, 2000; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Boyle-Baise et al., 2001; Enos & Morton, 2003; Gazley, Bennett, & Littlepage, 2013; Shea, 2011; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008)*. In their interviews of 67 staff members from CSOs engaged in relationships with a local university, Tryon and Stoecker *(2008)* found that staff members perceived compatibility of goals between the organization and the institution as an integral aspect of a successful partnership. Shared programs and initiatives should also align with the mission of the organizations *(Alcantara, 2012; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Gazley et al., 2013; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008)*. In addition, community partners need to be actively involved in the planning and development of community service programs *(Blouin & Perry, 2009; Boyle-Baise et al., 2001; Enos & Morton, 2003; Nduna, 2007)*. Greater involvement of community partners will increase the likelihood of a sustainable service program. Planning for university–community partnerships requires a balance of a clear understanding of expected outcomes and available resources with strategies and mechanisms for adaptability to changes in all parties' environments *(Baum, 2000)*. For example, the establishment of a shared vision and high levels of trust enabled stakeholders to resolve conflicts within a university–community partnership in California *(Shea, 2011)*. In their qualitative inquiry of 40 community partners of a university service-learning program, Miron and

Moely *(2006)* found that those CSOs who indicated greater involvement in the planning of the partnership also reported greater perceived benefits.

Listening to the needs of the CSOs can also help universities develop meaningful opportunities for student volunteers. Active involvement of both parties requires transparent and continuous communication. In their quantitative study of 290 university service-learning partners in Indiana, Gazley et al. *(2013)* found that 76.8% of CSOs rated clear and continuous communication as essential or very important to the success of their partnership. Unfortunately, many university–community partnerships are characterized by ineffective communication *(Birdsall, 2005; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker, Tryon, & Hilgendorf, 2009; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008).* Evidently the perceived success of these interorganizational partnerships largely depends on the relationship between stakeholders involved *(Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007).* Developing shared power is an integral aspect of successful university–community partnerships *(Shea, 2011)* and is closely related to whether the relationship was initiated by the community, the university, or collaboratively by both parties *(Glover & Silka, 2013).* A mutual recognition of the value of a partnership and a high level of commitment toward its long-term sustainability will help produce reciprocity—an essential part of successful partnerships *(d'Arlach, Sánchez, & Feuer, 2009; Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Boyle-Baise et al., 2001; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Gazley et al., 2013).*

In summary, the present study was guided by a framework derived from literature focused on perceived benefits of university–community partnerships and common characteristics of successful partnerships. A CSO considering involvement in a partnership with an athletic department is assumed to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether the perceived benefits outweigh the opportunity costs. These benefits include increased organizational capacity, improved organizational image from association with a higher education institution, and an opportunity to extend the organization's mission by educating students and university stakeholders. The perceived success of the partnership will depend on the mission alignment, fully shared decision-making processes, effective communication, clear understanding of evaluation practices and processes, and a shared belief in the value of the partnership.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives and attitudes of community service organizations engaged in a partnership with a high-profile athletic department. Thus, this study utilized a qualitative design to explore the perceptions and attitudes of community service organizations concerning their partnerships with an intercollegiate athletic program. Our research was thus guided by the following research questions:

1. Why do community service organizations engage in community service partnerships with intercollegiate athletic departments?

2. What are community service organization program managers' attitudes toward the effectiveness of student-athlete community service programs?

Participants

The population for this study included community service agencies in a Top 50 Metropolitan Statistical Area in the southeastern part of the United States. The university associated with the agencies in this study is a large urban NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision institution. The average household income in the local community was approximately $10,000 less than the national average during 2008–2012. The population in the local community was predominantly Caucasian, but approximately one in five people identified their ethnicity as African American. The sampling frame included CSOs that were identified by and affiliated with the university's athletic program. An athletic administrator in the athletic department provided the list of agencies and contact information for each agency. The list included 43 organizations. Following approval from the researchers' Institutional Review Board and Human Subjects Protection Program, individual agencies were selected using purposeful random sampling. Purposeful random sampling is appropriate when the potential purposeful sample is large *(Marshall & Rossman, 2011)*. Twenty-eight agencies were selected. Three agencies were not interested in participating, two agencies requested that we follow up at a later time, and 11 agencies did not reply to our request for an interview. Twelve agencies responded to our request for participation, which resulted in 15 participant interviews (see Table 1). Three organizations had two staff members present during the interviews; only one staff member participated for each of the other 10 organizations. Because a number of agencies did not respond, were not inter-

ested in participating, or requested participation at a later time, the resulting sample was self-selected. The limitations presented by a self-selected sample will be discussed later in this article.

Table 1. Study Participants

Organization	Organizational Focus	National Affiliation	Pseudonym	Title	Experience with Student-Athlete Volunteers	Perceived S-A Volunteers to Be Unique Assets
1	Health	Yes	Jessica	President	Yes	Yes
1	Health	Yes	Anna	Development director	Yes	Yes
2	Community	No	Leslie	Program coordinator	Yes	Yes
3	Sport	Yes	Maria	Program coordinator	Yes (Limited)	No
4	Sport	No	Kathryn	Program director	Yes	Yes
5	Health	No	Becky	Program therapist	No	Yes
6	Youth	Yes	Cindy	Director of marketing & development	Yes (Limited)	No
7	Environmental	No	Danielle	Volunteer coordinator	No	Yes
8	Health	Yes	Stephanie	Executive director	No	Yes
9	Health	Yes	Natalie	Branch director	No, but had previously met with athletic department to discuss potential collaboration	Yes
10	Youth	Yes	Jeff	Program coordinator	Yes	Yes
11	Community	No	Adam	Recreation manager	Yes	Yes
12	Youth	No	William	Director of marketing & development	Yes	Yes

The 15 participants in this study represented local and national community service organizations. For the purposes of this study, a local organization was defined as one that served the city community, and a national organization was defined as one affiliated with a larger brand (e.g., United Way, Big Brothers/Big Sisters). Six of the

12 participating organizations were affiliated with a national organization (Table 1). Participants' titles included president, executive director, development director, program coordinator, program director, program therapist, director of marketing & development, volunteer coordinator, branch director, volunteer manager, and recreation manager. For consistency across the sample, the main contact person(s) of each CSO were selected as participants based on their presumed firsthand knowledge of their organization's partnership with the university's athletic department. The athletic department reported these individuals as their primary contact within each organization. Participants from the majority of the CSOs participating in the current study were also involved in some capacity with the student-athlete volunteer programs (Table 1). The possibility that this overlap could result in socially biased results was accepted as a limitation of the current study since most CSOs had only one or two individuals involved in the management of their partnership with the athletic department.

Procedure

Fifteen people participated in semistructured interviews. Each interview addressed a number of areas: initial engagement with the athletic department, experience and perceptions of student-athlete volunteers, perceived effectiveness of partnership, and future intentions for partnership with the athletic department. Guiding open-ended interview questions included "How did you become connected with the athletic department?", "Please discuss your thoughts on student-athletes volunteering with your organization," "What do you believe is important for student-athlete community service partnerships to be successful?", and "How do you intend to utilize student-athlete volunteers in the next six months?" Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted with the executive director from one CSO. The pilot interview helped the researchers refine the wording and sequence of some of the interview questions. The research team assigned pseudonyms to participants to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The research team followed a two-cycle independent coding process to reduce and analyze the data *(Saldaña, 2009)*. The researchers also transcribed participant interviews verbatim. This gave researchers the opportunity to understand the context and key areas discussed in the interviews *(Patton, 2002)*. Next, the

team engaged in initial coding for each question on the interview guide. During initial coding, the researchers engaged in inductive coding methods including attribute, holistic, descriptive, and in vivo *(Saldaña, 2009)*. Inductive coding allowed themes and patterns to emerge that reflected participants' perspectives on community engagement with athletic departments. The codes derived from the first cycle of coding were added to a "start list" *(Miles & Huberman, 1994)*. Following initial coding, the team reviewed codes and eliminated those that were not useful *(Lofland & Lofland, 1995)*. This gave the researchers an opportunity to compare their initial code lists and discuss any discrepancies regarding emerging themes until full agreement was reached. From there, the research team combined several codes into larger categories in a process known as focused coding *(Lofland & Lofland, 1995)*.

During the second cycle of coding, the researchers reorganized related codes into broader themes through pattern coding *(Saldaña, 2009)*. Pattern coding was particularly appropriate for the second cycle of coding because it is designed to examine patterns of causes and explanations of human behavior *(Miles & Huberman, 1994)*. Following each coding cycle, the researchers convened to debrief on the data analysis, compare codes or themes, and clarify findings and meanings of coded data. A constant comparative analysis was used to limit researcher bias and establish confirmability *(Guba & Lincoln, 1985)*. The researchers also made a conscious effort to remain neutral in their verbal and nonverbal responses during the interviews. Debriefing augmented the trustworthiness of the data as it allowed researchers to reflect on personal assumptions and biases as well as reactions to participant experiences *(Patton, 2002)*. The following results and discussion illustrate the common themes derived from the interviews.

Findings

Research Question 1: Why Do Community Agencies Engage in Community Service Partnerships With Intercollegiate Athletic Departments?

Our first research question was designed to explore community partners' motives and perceived benefits for engaging in a relationship with an athletic department. Four major themes emerged from our interviews. Community agencies typically engaged in these partnerships to (a) increase their volunteer capacity, (b) have

a long-term impact on student-athletes by introducing them to a specific cause, (c) educate the athletic department and student-athletes about their mission, or (d) benefit from monetary or in-kind donations.

Increase volunteer capacity. Interviewees indicated that their local or national organizations were generally volunteer-driven with limited paid staff. As for many nonprofit organizations, volunteer recruitment and retention were proclaimed imperative organizational tasks due to their limited organizational structure and resources. Several CSOs acknowledged that their programs would not function without the dedication and engagement of volunteers. For example, Anna highlighted the importance of volunteers within her health organization by simply stating, "We could not do what we do without volunteers." Many interviewees expressed their gratitude for these individuals and shared stories with specific examples illustrating the integral role of volunteers within their organizations. For example, Jessica, an executive director for a health organization, conveyed how volunteers have enabled the agency to scale its programming:

> Our volunteer pool has grown tremendously… our program has expanded a lot… our staff has not grown a lot. We were offering two support groups at first and then we made that four, and then six, and now we're at 54 [support groups] a month.

Another aspect of volunteer capacity that emerged from our interviews was the perceived valuable skills of student-athlete volunteers. Overall, having the discipline to follow instructions emerged as one of the more important traits of student-athletes, along with the value of their ability to work as part of a team. Stephanie, the executive director of a well-recognized health organization, expressed why she strongly believes there are noticeable differences between student-athletes and other community volunteers within her organization:

> You have the self-discipline, the time, you've got the physical, you've got the mental, you've got the being a part of a team, you got all these things. I think it is an amazing group of kids who the student athletes are. They're amazing. The set of values and skills and just a lot that they can bring to any organization.… I am a big fan of that so yes, you don't have to convince us

of the value of [student-athletes] because I vote A++ on them.… A lot of people don't have that [teamwork] skill. [Usually] it's a one person show or all about me.… [Student-athletes] roll [self-discipline and teamwork] together and they're both very necessary for the success of what you're trying to do. That to me defines probably an ideal volunteer if you think about it.

Thirteen of the 15 people we interviewed perceived noticeable differences between student-athletes and their community volunteers (see Table 1). According to some of the interviewees, their typical volunteers seldom have the ability to work both on their own and as part of a larger team depending on the situation. Therefore, student-athletes were often perceived to provide exceptional values and skills to increase an organization's volunteer capacity. William iterated why his youth organization recognized student-athletes as unique volunteer assets:

First of all I think student-athletes have a Type-A DNA that they are outgoing, they are doers, and they are motivated.… They obviously know how to balance their time. They are not slackers if they are playing their sport and going to school… so just by their very make-up they are the kind of people we want on our team so to speak… they have that visibility and credibility that elevates whatever you're doing to another level.

Student-athletes' physical strength and athletic ability were also recognized as important assets. Many of the organizations in the current study organized physically active events (e.g., 5K run/ walk) that required a lot of heavy lifting during set-up and cleanup. Student-athletes were viewed as important assets for these activities, as many of the organizations typically relied on older volunteers, which left the few paid staff members with responsibility for most of the work. Several interviewees also expressed awareness of the direct impact student-athletes had on their program participants. Leslie explained how student-athletes were better able to connect with a lot of their youth participants in sports activities compared to their community volunteers:

It's really hard for regular volunteers to find a common interest [with our program participants]. It's much easier for student athletes to come in and the kids can tell just by the way they walk or what they're coming

for, that they're athletes. They can immediately connect in sports.

Long-term impact on student-athletes. Having a long-term impact on student-athletes in regard to volunteering and philanthropy emerged as the second theme from these interviews. Several interviewees indicated that their organizations not only seek to increase their volunteer capacity but also aim to develop relationships with student-athlete volunteers for positive long-term impact. The type of impact was often described as future involvement with the organization. For example, Anna endorsed the importance for her health organization of having an opportunity to introduce student-athletes not only to the organization, but also to a specific cause for long-term involvement:

> Again, their real purpose for us, not only do we need volunteers to do the meals, but it is to connect them.… when they leave [the university] they're going to just take their thoughts about [our organization] out into the community wherever they end up. Wherever they may live, if there's a program [like ours] they may choose to be involved with it.

In other words, organizations aim to develop strong relationships with student-athletes with the hope that they will continue to volunteer for their programs or provide monetary support for an organization when they are in a position to do so. It is important to note that some organizations suggested that the long-term impact on student-athletes does not necessarily have to be the same organization. They considered future involvement with other organizations supporting similar causes to be a positive long-term impact.

Educational opportunities. A third theme focused on educational opportunities also emerged as a reason for CSOs to engage in partnerships with athletic departments. Some organizations explicitly seek out new opportunities to raise awareness of not only their organizational mission, but also the greater social issue. For example, Kathryn, the program director of a sports organization, discussed educational opportunities for raising awareness of the importance of social inclusion of people with disabilities:

> We look for people that might not have that background or that experience that haven't worked a lot with people

> with disabilities that it's a place for us to go and find people so that we can educate. Education is so important to us.

Other interviewees relayed similar altruistic motives of increasing awareness of a social issue and educating student-athletes, parents, coaches, and/or athletic administrators. Whereas the second theme was explicitly targeted at student-athletes, organizations motivated by educational opportunities were interested in extending their mission by educating as many people as possible associated with the athletic department. Several interviewees expressed an interest in having more opportunities to conduct informational sessions with athletic administrators and student-athletes. At the same time, it is important to note that the interviewees had not explicitly asked the athletic department for the opportunity to meet with the athletic administrators or student-athletes to educate them about their mission and programs in the local community.

Improved organizational image and fund raising. Although none of the staff members we interviewed indicated improved organizational image as a reason for engaging in the partnership, this appeared to be an underlying outcome of these partnerships. It is important to note that many organizations admitted they had not necessarily considered the influence on their organizational image prior to our interview but quickly provided us reasons for why or how the partnership had a positive impact on the organization. William noted that the association with a high-profile athletic department might be a viable motive among smaller CSOs for improved organizational image and increased fundraising ability:

> It's for a lesser known or small [nonprofit] organization it's almost a credibility thing… like a seal of approval. If you see [university] football players working with an [organization], it is probably a [legitimate] group… and you know… that kind of thing. Whether you perceive it that way or not, the public may see it that way and obviously it can increase the dollars you raise because of that visibility.

Interviewees from two of the 12 organizations also noted that they had benefited monetarily from their association with the intercollegiate athletic department. Jessica and Anna described

benefiting from a performance-based charity donation program organized by one of the university athletic teams whereby spectators pledged donations of more than $65,000 to their organization based on on-field performance. Another organization's interviewee mentioned benefiting from fund-raising efforts directly organized by student-athletes. Cindy was grateful for fundraising efforts by the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee for her youth organization:

> We were [the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee] the organization of choice so we received actually some monetary funding from them as well. They did a lot of… they did like three or four fundraisers through the year for us. Obviously, any time that we can receive funding and especially new funding… it's very beneficial to us.

Financial motives did not emerge as the primary reasons for engaging in partnerships with the intercollegiate athletic department, but local CSOs expressed their appreciation and described the benefits of receiving donations through their association with the athletic department. In-kind donations of sports equipment emerged as another benefit when monetary donations were not available. Leslie stressed the importance of in-kind donations from one of the university athletic teams for her organization's sustained program delivery:

> [The coaches and student-athletes] also have been extremely, extremely helpful in donating equipment that we are constantly in need of.… Now that we have in the last two years now participated in organized leagues… they have provided huge donations in regards to [player equipment and apparel] and really kind of anything they can. When there is a shortage of players that they can offer us, and time, they offer us resources in another way.

In summary, four predominant themes emerged for why CSOs engaged in partnerships with the intercollegiate athletic department. First, the partnership was perceived to have the potential to increase the organizations' volunteer capacity. Second, several CSOs also aimed to develop long-term relationships with student-athletes for sustainable impact. Third, other CSOs expressed more altruistic motives of wanting to educate more people about their mission or a broader social cause. Lastly, some interviewees recog-

nized the benefit of monetary and in-kind donations from association with a high-profile athletic department.

Research Question 2: What Are Community Service Organization Program Managers' Attitudes Toward the Effectiveness of Student-Athlete Community Service Programs?

A discrepancy was found in the perceived effectiveness of the student-athlete community service program based on the contact person that community agencies worked with in the athletic department. The athletic department recently transitioned from having a centralized CHAMPS/Life Skills Program coordinator to dividing the duties among a number of staff members within the marketing department, which now oversees community partnerships. This transition has been a difficult experience for many of the community agencies. Brittany expressed her frustration and perceived a lack of attention for her health organization among the new contact persons within the athletic department:

> In the marketing department.… I find that they're really unorganized. And not necessarily unorganized, just not giving enough time for us to prepare. Sending an e-mail out or calling us even as a day before an event. It's a scramble.

Still, most interviewees described positive experiences with the former program coordinator, who was perceived to be both responsive and easy to work with. The former program coordinator had developed personal relationships within many of the community agencies whose representatives we interviewed by engaging as a community volunteer or by serving on their board of directors. Unfortunately, the transition from one designated contact person to several staff members within the marketing department was perceived to be a cause of frustration for several people we interviewed. Stephanie described how she received a phone call the day before an event where her organization was asked to set up a booth. Other agencies described similar experiences and were disappointed in the poor communication by the new contact persons in the athletic department.

A few community CSOs, however, relied solely on team-specific contacts without any interaction with athletic administrators. These organizations' interviewees described positive experiences as the organizations had cultivated organic relationships with stu-

dent-athletes for fostering lasting partnerships. For example, a student-athlete would volunteer with a CSO for academic or personal reasons. This student-athlete who had enjoyed their initial experience would then bring some of their teammates on subsequent visits. Kathryn described how her organization built and nurtured relationships with student-athletes without any interaction with the administrative staff:

> I think the first team that we worked [with] the most was with field hockey. [One student-athlete] was like, "Oh my gosh, I love this. Will you [teammates] want to come out and do it with wheelchair basketball?" They actually unofficially adopted our basketball team. Every Monday night they would have anywhere from five to six girls that came out from field hockey and would play basketball with our guys every week and they became great friends with them. Then it turned into much bigger where wheelchair basketball that we did, the national tournament this past weekend, [the] women's soccer team was out. Almost all of their players came out and volunteered. Now it turned into more and more teams coming out, more and more groups coming out.

Interviewees from all 12 CSOs collectively acknowledged the importance of clear communication for successful partnerships. Effective partnerships were characterized by timely, authentic, and responsive two-way communication. Unfortunately, several interviewees expressed concerns with the lack of communication in their current relationship. For example, as Jessica noted, "communication could be improved quite a bit" in the relationship between her health organization and the athletic department. A mutual understanding of the expectations of the partnership by both parties was also highlighted as a crucial aspect of effective partnerships. However, several CSOs suggested a perceived lack of understanding of their community organization and their expectations of the partnership. Although most organizations had some experience with student-athlete volunteers (see Table 1), most considered inquiries by the athletic department about volunteer opportunities for student-athletes to be infrequent. Many of the interviewees related that assistance from the athletic department was mostly confined to complimentary tickets to athletic events and memorabilia donated for silent auctions. This was perceived as problematic by the staff members interviewed since many CSOs

are volunteer-driven; these interviewees expressed a strong interest in having student-athletes engage with their programs.

For example, Maria recognized that student-athletes may not be able to commit to weekly volunteer positions but described how a team of student-athletes could help them set up their fields for the season in an hour or two. She reported periodic communication from the athletic department via e-mail but stated it was primarily one-way communication of available complimentary tickets rather than a dialogue on how the organizations could create a mutually beneficial partnership:

> The [woman] that contacts me from the athletic depart-ment, I get e-mails every once and a while from the ath-letic department now, but it's like "Do you guys want to buy football tickets?" or for your staff or something like that. It's not anything engaging except for that basketball thing was and we were in good communication when that was happening, but there's no other… we would like to do stuff for our [sports] coaches, maybe with [a university] team, stuff like that, anything that we could do to help benefit both [organizations].

The lack of inquiries by the athletic department about com-munity service opportunities for student-athletes with the local CSO programs and the perceived lack of understanding may be an indication of the mixed motivation of the athletic department. Interviewees' reports of receiving complimentary tickets to athletic events and items for silent auctions more often than groups of stu-dent-athlete volunteers for community service with local programs suggests the athletic department may be engaged in the partnership for positive publicity instead of supporting the local community. It is important to note, however, that the people we interviewed had not explicitly asked the athletic department for more student-athlete volunteers and did not appear to be proactive in their own communication with the athletic department.

The interviewees in this study, however, expressed a genuine interest in developing meaningful opportunities for all parties involved (e.g., student-athlete, athletic department, and the CSO). Despite scarce resources of many of these nonprofit organizations, interviewees expressed a strong interest in meeting student-athletes on an individual basis to learn about their interest and determine their role with the organizations. As Adam, a recreation manager of a local youth organization, stated, "It's best for us to meet indi-

vidually with a volunteer and to sit down and figure out what their strengths are and how we can utilize those."

An important characteristic of effective student-athlete community service programs was that the CSOs had existing programs and projects that student-athletes were found to match well. Thus, these programs had not been designed for the purpose of attracting student-athletes and obtaining publicity for the organization. Danielle, the volunteer coordinator for an environmental CSO, suggested, "You never create a project just to get volunteers in. You have the projects and you employ the volunteers [student-athletes] to do them."

In summary, the findings of our study indicated that CSOs engaged in partnerships with intercollegiate athletic departments for several reasons. The four predominant themes that emerged from our interviews were (a) increasing their volunteer capacity, (b) having a positive long-term impact on student-athletes, (c) altruistic motives of educating student-athletes through service projects, and (d) receiving monetary or in-kind donations from association with the athletic department. Although several interviewees expressed frustration with the transition to new contact persons in the athletic department, they also shared a genuine interest in developing meaningful service opportunities for student-athletes and thus offering the potential to create mutually beneficial partnerships between the CSO and the athletic department. These findings revealed some commonalities and differences with prior literature. Consequently, there are several implications for advancing partnerships between CSOs and the athletic department.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives and attitudes of community service organizations engaged in a partnership with a high-profile athletic department. Although scholars have considered the voices of community partners of institutions of higher education *(Blouin & Perry, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008; Worrall, 2007)*, this research contributes to the literature by considering the experiences of community partners of a unique aspect of the university: the athletic department. It is important to expand our understanding through the lens of athletics since extant knowledge on university–community partnerships may not generalize to partnerships involving student-athletes, considering the unique nature of the student-athlete expe-

rience in campus communities *(Jolly, 2008; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2011, 2013)*.

Findings indicated that CSOs engaged in partnerships with the athletic department to increase their volunteer capacity *(Blouin & Perry, 2009; Prentice & Garcia, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006)*, which helped the organizations increase their ability to fulfill their goals and objectives. This is in contrast to Tryon and Stoecker's *(2008)* findings indicating that most community partners did not engage in a university service-learning program to increase their organizational capacity.

The findings of the current study contributed to the literature on university–community partnerships in several ways. Findings of the present study revealed that student-athlete volunteers were perceived to provide valuable human resources for the CSOs. The majority of interviewees perceived student-athlete volunteers as unique assets compared to their general community volunteers (see Table 1). Student-athletes were portrayed as attractive volunteers due to their ability to work as a team, greater discipline, self-motivation, and ability to serve as positive role models for program participants. Although prior research findings indicated that CSOs generally perceive student volunteers to be noticeably different from community volunteers *(Edwards et al., 2001)*, student-athletes are often perceived negatively by other university stakeholders (e.g., faculty and general student body) regarding their academic competence and contributions *(Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom, Sedlacek, & McEwen, 1995; Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007)*. This raises an interesting dilemma, as previous research suggests that student-athletes are cognizant of their public status and are more aware of the importance of being involved in community service than the general student body *(Gayles et al., 2012)*.

It is important to note that intercollegiate athletic departments are encouraged by the NCAA to invest in student-athlete development opportunities, including service engagement *(NCAA, 2007)*. Athletic departments have emerged as one of the largest departmental budgets within institutions of higher education *(Polite, Waller, Trendafilova, & Spearman, 2011)*. Thus, athletics has the potential to perform an integral role in institutional efforts to advance university–community partnerships. The current study serves as a first step in advancing our understanding of university–community partnerships involving athletic departments and whether these relationships are distinctly different from general university–community partnerships. In the current study, student-athletes were also perceived to have a positive and direct impact on program

participants, which supports findings of previous research on the benefits of university–community partnerships *(Edwards et al., 2001; Gazley et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006)*.

In contrast to prior studies, we did not find CSOs engaging in partnerships for the enrichment of their organization through staff and organizational development *(Edwards et al., 2001; Gazley et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006)*. Although none of the staff members interviewed expressed this motive as a reason for engaging in the partnership, most CSOs suggested that their relationship with a high-profile athletic department had a strong positive impact on their organizational image. It must be noted that interviewees in the present study may have provided altruistic (and thus more socially acceptable) reasons for engaging in partnerships with the athletic department when the real motive was increased visibility. Future research should attempt to develop a deeper understanding of such underlying motives, as previous research indicates that CSOs primarily motivated by external benefits such as increased visibility are less likely to be interested in long-term relationships *(Littlepage, Gazley, & Bennett, 2012)*.

Although there may be some degree of social desirability bias in the present study, engaging in partnerships for altruistic reasons emerged as another theme in our findings *(Alcantara, 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006)*. Interviewees described how their organization's partnership with the athletic department provided important educational opportunities. These organizations expressed a desire to increase awareness of a particular social issue and educate student-athletes about how they may help address some of these issues. Some of the interviewees considered their organization an extension of the educational institution for student-athlete volunteers *(Tryon & Stoecker, 2008)*. A noteworthy contribution of the present study was the finding that some CSOs appear to value the partnership with the athletic department for providing them opportunities for a long-term impact on student-athletes. Future research should attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying motives for valuing these opportunities.

Another important contribution of this study to the literature on university–community partnerships is that some interviewees indicated the importance of tangible benefits from their relationship with the athletic department. These benefits included both monetary fundraising and in-kind donations. These types of benefits for CSOs have not been reported in previous scholarship on university–community partnerships. A possible explanation is that previous research has not focused on CSOs partnering with entities

that have the large financial budgets of NCAA Division I athletic departments *(Polite et al., 2011)* and similarly, such a department's ability to involve CSOs in large-scale sporting events. Although none of the people we interviewed described these collateral benefits as their primary motive for working with the athletic department, it is important to note that organizational motives for involvement can change over the course of a university–community partnership *(Worrall, 2007)*. Thus, some of the CSOs may be inclined to continue their relationship with the athletic department in view of the resource scarcity that most interviewees described as a considerable challenge in their program delivery. Our findings also revealed valuable information about CSOs' perceptions of the effectiveness of student-athlete community service programs.

Communication was unanimously identified as the most important element of effective partnerships. This supports previous literature, which indicates that sustainable partnerships require a clear understanding of the goals of the partnership and a strong alignment between the partners *(Holland & Gelmon, 1998)*. Unfortunately, many of the interviewees perceived their organizations' relationship with the athletic department as characterized by ineffective communication *(Birdsall, 2005; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Gazley et al., 2013; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008)*. This problem was apparently exacerbated by the athletic department's transition from using a centralized CHAMPS/Life Skills Program coordinator as a liaison to communicating with CSOs via multiple staff members within the marketing department. The CSOs' communications may also be a factor, however, as none of the decision makers we interviewed had explicitly asked the athletic department for more student-athlete volunteers or opportunities to inform athletic administrators and the student-athletes about their organization and programming in the local community.

Baum *(2000)* stated that many university–community partnerships are characterized by discrepancies between rhetoric and reality in which stakeholders "imagine that simply creating a partnership magically produces resources that will solve problems, without realistically analyzing the problems, strategizing to address them, and organizing necessary resources" *(p. 234)*. Findings of the present study indicated ambiguous roles and misunderstanding in the goals and objectives of the athletic department–community partnership. Interviewees expressed concern that the athletic department allocated complimentary tickets and auction items to their organizations more often than it directed student-athletes to them as volunteers. This finding also epitomizes

the focus on charity rather than mutually beneficial relationships in many partnerships between institutions of higher education and community partners *(Morton, 1995; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000)*. The disappointment among the local CSOs might also be an indication of the unrealistic expectations and limited resources that characterize many university–community partnerships *(Baum, 2000)*. Moreover, many partnerships are characterized by a power imbalance between institutions of higher education and CSOs, which is why the university may often "drive the agenda" of the partnership *(Maurrasse, 2002, p. 134)*.

Despite these issues, many interviewees expressed a strong interest in developing sustainable long-term relationships between their CSO and the athletic department. These findings are similar to what Tryon et al. *(2008)* discovered in their qualitative inquiry of 64 community partners: Despite several obstacles, many CSOs maintained a desire to continue their service-learning partnerships. The apparent misunderstanding between the stakeholders might be interpreted as an indication that caution is needed. At the same time, it is imperative to recognize that the conflicts arising in university–community partnerships can also result in opportunities for stakeholders to improve the partnership by clarifying goals and objectives and addressing prior shortcomings *(Prins, 2005)*. These findings indicate the opportunity to develop more sophisticated partnerships.

Practical Implications

People we interviewed expressed a strong interest in having more student-athlete volunteers engage in their programs, which could provide a "win-win" situation for athletic departments and CSOs. Therefore, creating improved partnerships would not only provide increased positive publicity for athletic departments, but also increased service opportunities for student-athletes and staff members. In light of the economic constraints found in many intercollegiate athletic departments *(Fulks, 2013)*, partnering with local CSOs also gives these departments an opportunity to support their student-athletes while expending minimal resources. It is important to recognize that we collected data only from CSOs and cannot speak for the athletic department's actual motivation for engaging in community partnerships or the department's perceived benefits of collaborating with CSOs in their area. The strong interest expressed by the CSOs in this study, however, suggests that more sophisticated partnerships may be beneficial for the athletic

department, whether motivated by positive publicity, goodwill, or altruism.

The athletic department could assist with this process by providing opportunities for their student-athletes to identify their personal community service interest, which would provide their student-athletes more autonomy and help athletic administrators better engage their community partners. Athletic administrators should also engage in genuine two-way communication with their partners for long-term sustainability *(Jarvie & Paule-Koba, 2013)*. This entails listening to the needs of CSOs for cultivating mutually beneficial partnerships *(Blouin & Perry, 2009)*.

At the same time, CSOs need to develop more realistic expectations of their partnership with the athletic department *(Baum, 2000)*. Thus, community partners need to be flexible with student-athlete volunteer engagement and should identify potential opportunities suited for volunteers on short notice. Leaders of CSOs also need to discuss their expectations from the onset of the partnership to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of the partnership. Although community partners may have a particular program in mind for student-athletes, it is important that they remain open to identifying meaningful opportunities for the athletic department while considering the time constraints of student-athletes *(Jolly, 2008; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2011, 2013)*. This supports Strier's *(in press)* argument for the importance of recognizing yet balancing the complex paradoxical differences of stakeholders involved in university–community partnerships. Although the diverse constraints and needs of stakeholders can make reciprocal partnerships challenging to create, this can still be achieved by embracing the differences among stakeholders and facilitating open-minded organizational cultures for creating mutually beneficial relationships *(Nichols, Anucha, Houwer, & Wood, 2013; Strier, in press)*. CSOs are also encouraged to reach out to an athletic department and initiate the partnership, as this can help mitigate the effects of unequal power structures associated with many university–community partnerships *(Glover & Silka, 2013)*.

Findings from this exploratory study may also have policy implications related to university–community partnerships. Universities are increasingly engaging with local communities through partnerships with various community stakeholders *(Barnes et al., 2009; Cherry & Shefner, 2005)*. The perceived unique value of student-athlete volunteers among local and national CSOs, and the expressed interest in developing more sophisticated partnerships with the athletic department, indicate the potential role of

athletics in broader community engagement efforts of institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, student-athletes continue to be associated with negative stereotypes across campus communities *(Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Engstrom et al., 1995; Simons et al., 2007)*. The primary policy recommendation from the current study is that university policies better integrate athletics in more holistic institutional approaches toward community engagement. Overcoming the competing logics of athletic and academic departments requires strategies similar to those recommended for overcoming the paradoxical differences inherent in university–community partnerships *(Strier, in press)*. The university and athletic department need to accept their inherently conflicting identities and emphasize how their unique characteristics can be channeled toward common goals *(Buer, 2009)*.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has several limitations that may limit the generalizability of the findings. First, the intentional lack of response or refusal of CSOs to participate in the study resulted in a self-selected participant sample. Self-selection has the potential to bias results. However, we feel that the diversity of the sample yielded multiple perspectives that could be transferable to the experiences of other CSOs with university athletic departments. Second, only community partnerships of one athletic department in the Southeast were examined. Nonetheless, the findings of this exploratory study provide valuable insight into community agencies' perceptions of their partnership with an NCAA Division I athletic department, which future studies can build upon. Future research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of partnerships between athletic departments and CSOs. For example, are there any differences in these types of partnerships among public versus private institutions? A third limitation of the current study was the unexpected limited experience with student-athlete volunteers among some of the CSOs. Future studies may examine whether the length of the partnership or amount of student-athlete volunteers per organization influences community partners' perceptions of the partnership. A fourth limitation was that the mission or objectives of the athletic department for the community partnerships was not examined in the present study. Future research should include interviews with athletic department staff and content analyses of organizational documents to gain multiple perspectives. Finally, the study focused solely on community service partnerships with local CSOs or local chapters of national CSOs. Future research should examine the

relationship between university athletic departments and national-level CSOs rather than local CSOs or local chapters of larger CSOs.

Conclusion

Although a growing amount of research has examined university–community partnerships, few studies have considered relationships between CSOs and intercollegiate athletic departments. This study's findings revealed that community partners cultivated a relationship with a high-profile athletic department primarily for (a) increasing their volunteer capacity; (b) opportunities to have a long-term impact on student-athletes; (c) educational opportunities for extending their mission; and (d) for a few CEOs, monetary and in-kind donations. Many partnerships were characterized by ambiguity and ineffective interorganizational communication. Despite these issues, most interviewees expressed a strong interest in developing sustainable long-term relationships, which suggests that athletic departments may attain a "win-win" situation from more advanced partnerships, whether the partners are motivated by public relations or goodwill. These findings provide important implications for both athletic administrators and community partners. Future studies are needed to build on these findings by exploring multiple perspectives of athletic department–community partnerships.

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