

Expansion of community college athletic programs

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*While community college intercollegiate athletic programs have been expanding in a somewhat sporadic manner, there have been few empirical studies which examine how and why these programs are growing. The current study investigates the questions of “how and why” with the goal of helping community college leaders to make informed decisions about athletic programs. The study was designed to build upon and provide more detailed information on a topic first discussed in *The Community College Enterprise* in 2006. The current article discusses leaders’ perceptions of four aspects of community college intercollegiate athletics: current funding for community college athletics, future funding for athletics, whether local students are attracted to the community college because of athletic programming, and whether statewide guidelines on community college intercollegiate athletics are needed.*

Introduction

Intercollegiate athletics in higher education have generated a great deal of research, debate, and public scrutiny for almost a century (Savage, 1929) and, more intensely, in the past decade (Holbrook, 2004; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2000). To the dismay of many academicians, few endeavors in higher education have generated more interest and excitement than athletics. Indeed, while the benefits of intercollegiate athletics to a university may be debatable, there is little doubt that growth in the number of four-year institutions of higher learning participating in athletics has been

steady across the nation, particularly at the Division One (or “Big Time” athletics) level.

The growth in community college intercollegiate athletics has, for the most part, been sporadic and regional. Very few empirical studies have examined community college athletics, and they often find that community colleges emulate four-year institutions (Fink & Kirk, 1979; Raepple, Peery, & Hohman, 1982). Until recently, community colleges in many states did not support any intercollegiate athletic teams. In recent years, however, more community colleges in more states have been initiating new athletic programs or expanding the number of athletic teams within existing programs. The expansion, while more national in scope, has continued to be sporadic and somewhat haphazard.

North Carolina is one of a growing number of states in which community college leaders are making decisions about initiating, expanding, or in some cases, terminating intercollegiate athletics programs (Hines, 2005). A lack of research may have contributed to the seemingly haphazard development of two-year college athletics in several states, including North Carolina. One recent study suggests the processes for establishing and funding new athletics programs at com-

munity colleges are not always well understood by community college leaders (Williams & Pennington, 2006). The current study was conducted to help community college decision-makers—presidents and board of trustee chairs—make informed decisions about how and why intercollegiate athletic programs should be initiated, expanded, or terminated. The study was designed to provide more detailed information on a topic discussed in *The Community College Enterprise* in 2006. This article discusses leaders’ perceptions of four aspects of community college intercollegiate athletics: current funding for community college athletics in North Carolina, future funding for athletics, whether local students are attracted to the community college because of athletic programming, and whether statewide guidelines on community college intercollegiate athletics are needed.

Methodology

A survey instrument on community college athletics was developed through a review of literature. The instrument was reviewed by community college leaders with experience or expertise in intercollegiate athletics, and it was tested through a pilot study of community college presidents in Oklahoma and community

Table 1: Institutional status regarding athletics

	Leader type	
	Presidents	Board Chairs
College has no teams	35	30
College currently has teams	19	11
Total responding	54	41

Table 2: Secure funding base for athletics by leader type

	Leader Type			
	President		Board Chair	
	#	%	#	%
Strongly disagree	36	66.70	14	34.10
Disagree	13	24.10	13	31.70
Neutral	3	5.60	6	14.60
Agree	1	1.90	2	4.90
Strongly agree	0	0	3	7.30
No response	1	1.90	3	7.30
Mean	1.42		2.13	
P value	.001			

alpha = .0125

Table 3: Funding for future athletic programs by leader type

	Leader Type			
	President		Board Chair	
	#	%	#	%
Strongly disagree	24	44.40	9	22.00
Disagree	23	42.60	19	46.30
Neutral	7	13.00	7	17.10
Agree	0	0	1	2.40
Strongly agree	0	0	1	2.40
No response	4	9.60		
Mean	1.69		2.08	
P value	.020			

alpha = .0125

college vice presidents in North Carolina. The final instrument uses a Likert scale; respondents are asked to read a series of statements on community college athletics and to express agreement or disagreement with each statement based on a five-point scale.

The survey instrument was mailed to 58 community college presidents and 58 board of trustee chairs. A total of 54 presidents completed the survey, representing a 93% response rate, and 41 board of trustee chairs responded for a response rate of 71%. The only demographic information gathered concerned whether or not the respondent's community college currently had athletic teams. As indicated in Table 1, 35 of the presidents and 30 of the Board Chairs were from colleges which did not have athletic teams and 19 of the presidents and 11 of the Board Chairs were from colleges with athletic teams.

T-tests were used to analyze the data to determine if there were significant differences between the mean responses of community college presidents and community college board of trustee chairs. For some items, further analysis determined if significant differences existed between the responses from presidents of colleges with athletic teams and presidents from colleges without athletic teams.

Findings: funding, local student-athletes, and state guidelines

The current funding situation for community college athletics in North Carolina is clearly not sound. Ninety-on percent of presidents disagreed or strongly disagreed that intercollegiate athletics at community colleges have a secure funding base. Results of the analysis are presented in Table 2. Sixty-five percent of board chairs strongly disagreed or disagreed that there is a secure funding base for community college intercollegiate athletics. The mean score for all board chairs is 2.13. There is a statistically significant difference in the mean score for presidents and board of trustee chairs, but both types of leaders state that there is not secure funding for athletics at this time.

The picture is no brighter for future funding of community college intercollegiate athletics in North Carolina. Eighty-seven percent of presidents strongly disagreed or disagreed there will be sufficient funding for new community college athletic programs in North Carolina in the future. As indicated in Table 3, the mean score for all presidents is 1.69. Additionally, 68% of board chairs strongly disagreed or disagreed there will be sufficient funding for new community college athletic programs in North Carolina

Table 4: Understanding the funding process for athletics by leader type

	Leader Type			
	President		Board Chair	
	#	%	#	%
Strongly disagree	1	1.90	2	4.90
Disagree	4	7.40	10	24.40
Neutral	8	14.80	12	29.30
Agree	17	31.50	8	19.50
Strongly agree	20	37.00	5	12.20
No response	4	7.40	4	9.80
Mean	4.02		3.11	
p value	.000			

alpha = .0125

Table 5: Understanding the funding process for athletics: presidents

Leader type by institutional status (with athletic teams/without teams)		
	Presidents with	Presidents without
No. of responses	18	30
Mean response	4.67	3.67
p value	.001	

alpha =.0125

Table 6: Understanding the funding process for athletics: board chair

Leader type by institutional status (with athletic teams/without teams)		
	Board chairs with	Board chairs without
No. of responses	11	26
Mean response	4.00	2.73
p value	.001	

alpha = .0125

in the future. The mean score for board chairs is 2.08.

A key factor in future funding of athletics is whether community college leaders fully understand the funding process for athletics. Sixty-nine percent of presidents responded that they fully understand the funding process for intercollegiate athletics at their community colleges. As indicated in Table 4, the mean score for all presidents is 4.02. Additionally, only 32% of board chairs responded that they fully understand the funding process for intercollegiate athletics at their community colleges. The mean score of board chairs is 3.11.

A comparison of presidents and board chairs regarding their understanding of the funding process for intercollegiate athletics at their community colleges indicates a statistically significant difference. Therefore, a comparison was conducted of presidents from institutions with athletic teams and president from institutions without intercollegiate athletics concerning their understanding of the funding process. As indicated in Table 5, a statistically significant difference appears. Likewise, a statistically significant difference occurs when comparing the perceptions of board chairs concerning their understanding of the funding process for intercollegiate athletics at their community col-

lege. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 6.

Open access is a central concept in any discussion of the community college. Do athletics encourage more students to attend? Are there local athletes who would attend the community college if athletics were offered? As indicated in Table 7, 57% of presidents strongly agreed or agreed that the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics at the community college encourages local students to continue their education. The mean score for all presidents is 3.59. Fifty-nine percent of board chairs strongly agreed or agreed the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics at the community college encourages local students to continue their education. The mean score for board chairs is 3.48.

A comparison of the perceptions of presidents and board chairs about intercollegiate athletics encouraging local students to continue their education showed no statistically significant difference. On the other hand, a comparison of presidents at institutions with and without intercollegiate athletics showed a statistically significant difference on the issue. Statistical significance was also found in the comparison of board chairs. The results of these analyses are presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 7: Athletics encourage local students by leader type

	Leader Type			
	President		Board Chair	
	#	%	#	%
Strongly disagree	4	7.40	1	2.40
Disagree	6	11.10	10	24.40
Neutral	13	24.10	5	12.20
Agree	16	29.60	17	41.50
Strongly agree	15	27.80	7	17.10
No response	1	2.40		
Mean	3.59		3.48	
P value	.635			

alpha = .0125

Table 8: Athletics encourage local students: presidents

Leader type by institutional status (with athletic teams/without teams)		
	Presidents with	Presidents without
No. of responses	18	34
Mean response	4.39	3.21
p value	.001	

alpha = .0125

Table 9: Athletics encourage local students: board chairs

Leader type by institutional status (with athletic teams/without teams)		
	Board chairs with	Board chair without
No. of responses	11	29
Mean response	4.36	3.14
p value	.001	

alpha = .0125

Although local governance is a hallmark of community colleges in North Carolina, uniform statewide guidelines have been suggested for intercollegiate athletics. As indicated in Table 10, 69% of North Carolina community college presidents have a preference for the establishment of statewide guidelines regarding intercollegiate athletics in North Carolina community colleges. The mean score for all presidents is 3.63. Sixty-six percent of North Carolina community college board chairs agreed or strongly agreed to establishment of statewide guidelines regarding the initiation of intercollegiate athletics for community colleges. The mean score for board chairs is 3.40. There is no statistically significant difference between the responses of presidents and board of trustee chairs.

Discussion

More students are wisely selecting the community college as the entrance point to higher education because of affordability, accessibility, and academic rigor. At the same time, more student-athletes are choosing community colleges to further their educations and to develop their athletic skills (Powell, 2007). Community colleges across the nation are establishing or expanding intercollegiate athletics programs at a consistent

pace, and the growth has led to increased scrutiny of the programs (Hines, 2005). Scrutiny leads to questions about why and how athletic programs are established, continued, or terminated.

Cowen (2005) has said college presidents, in consultation with people on and off their campuses, must establish the overall direction and key policies that lead athletic programs. In the current study, presidents and board chairs agree that the current and future funding of community college intercollegiate athletics are in doubt, a situation which may create fundamental problems for community colleges. Initiating a program without secure funding could have serious implications, including students being encouraged to attend the community college to participate in a particular athletic program even though that program may be canceled because of lack of funds. Such a scenario would create negative publicity, hurt institutional integrity, and create a lack of public confidence in the college's ability to deliver non-athletic programming. There could also be problems related to overall community support of the college.

According to Williams and Pennington (2006), the budget process for community college athletics is not well understood by college leaders. Both presi-

dents and board of trustee chairs indicate that athletics do not have a secure funding base today, and they both express general concern that sufficient funding may not be available for new community college athletic programs in the future. The current study, however, finds more presidents who express understanding of the athletics funding process. Furthermore, significantly more presidents from colleges with athletic teams claim understanding of the funding process compared to presidents from colleges without athletic teams. The current study shows significantly more board chairs from colleges with athletic programs expressing a greater understanding of the process than board chairs without intercollegiate athletic programs.

The current study indicates that, by a small margin, presidents and board chairs generally agree the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics encourages local students to continue their education. A comparison of presidents with (4.39) and without intercollegiate athletics (3.21) indicates a statistically significant difference concerning the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics as encouraging local students to continue their education at a community college. Consequently, students may enroll at a certain institution because it offers a particular sport not offered by neighboring community colleges. It is also anticipated that if student athletes had the opportunity to compete at the collegiate level, more student-athletes would consider at-

Table 10: Preference for statewide guidelines by leader type

	Leader type			
	President		Board Chair	
	#	%	#	%
Strongly Disagree	8	14.80	1	2.60
Disagree	2	3.70	5	13.20
Neutral	7	13	6	15.80
Agree	22	40.70	21	55.30
Strongly Agree	15	27.80	4	10.50
No response	1	2.60		
Mean	3.63		3.40	
p value	.385			

alpha = .0125

tending community colleges. Local student-athletes at community colleges perceive that the exposure and experience they receive from community college athletics is beneficial in transferring to a four-year college (Hines, 2005).

One of the most interesting findings of this study concerns the establishment of statewide guidelines covering intercollegiate athletics. Community colleges in North Carolina have a strong tradition of independence and long governance; therefore, the idea of statewide guidelines could face strong opposition among two-year college leaders. The current findings, however, indicate statewide guidelines can play a vital role in the success of intercollegiate athletic programs. One example relates to the uncertain future of funding for athletics. Guidelines on identifying funding sources for intercollegiate athletic programs before the program is implemented and planning for future funding to grow and maintain the program are essential. Using funds from student activity fees may supplement a program, but will be unlikely to provide substantial funding to implement or enhance an athletic program without other sources of funding. Increasing tuition or fees to pay for athletic programs may be acceptable to some students, yet unacceptable

to students such as single parents, displaced workers, and those on a fixed budget who do not participate in athletics or other student activities and enroll at the community college because of the affordable cost of tuition.

Conclusion

An open discussion which focuses on determining the needs of the college community and how athletics support the mission of the community college will best decide if an intercollegiate athletics program should be established. Further decisions about funding, recruitment, and governance need to have positive influences in the community, favorably affecting perspective students, current students, faculty, administration, donors, and all community stakeholders.

It is hoped that presidents, board chairs, other decision-makers, and practitioners involved in community college intercollegiate athletics will benefit from the findings of the study and that these leaders will work collaboratively to appropriately use athletics to benefit the community college and its students. The relationship between athletics and higher education is an American phenomenon that generates great passion and loyalty to teams and institutions. Although the range

and variety of sports is as diverse as education itself, college athletics are popular at every level of the higher education community, including the community college.

Intercollegiate athletics can make a significant contribution to the two-year college experience and can contribute to meeting the community college mission. As with every aspect of the community college, however, intercollegiate athletics require self-study, innovation, and leadership.

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