How Students View an Athletic Department’s Social Responsibility in Times of Racial Diversity and Social Unrest

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Introduction

This study examines position statements regarding racial diversity and social unrest from a large, midwestern university athletic department after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020. The position statements are examined through agenda-setting theory and how agenda setting influences corporate social responsibility. Using McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) agenda-setting theory, the athletic department’s position statements focused attention on the Black Lives Matter movement and protests, telling their stakeholders to think about what was happening in society. As Denham (2019) described as the second level of agenda-setting theory, beyond telling their stakeholders what to think about, these position statements made the issue relevant and told people how to think about the issue, adding to the salience of the topic. Since the 1950s, the definition of corporate social responsibility has evolved and remains an expected part of how a corporation does business, asking what obligations does a corporation have to society (Carroll, 1999). As racial diversity and social unrest continue to be at the forefront of our society, athletic departments like organizations and corporations are having to answer to their social responsibility regarding these issues. Today we have seen professional sports leagues and individual teams take a stand in support of racial diversity and as a reaction to social unrest, and athletic departments are also doing so in a show of support of their athletes. The purpose of this study is to question the position statements and support offered by one university’s athletic department and how students and student-athletes as stakeholders for the department reacted to the position statements, and if they feel that the social responsibility of the athletic department has been fulfilled.

Methods

This study is in progress and the method of data collection will be through a survey of students and student-athletes at the university, after obtaining Human Subject Institutional Review Board approval. The survey development will include a panel of experts and a pilot study. The survey questions will be open-ended and focus on what students think should be included in a position statement about racial diversity and social unrest; how was the university’s position statement received; and what future position statements or actions would students expect from the university regarding their social responsibility.

Results/Discussion

The results from this study are expected to provide insight on the student and student-athlete perspective on how their university’s athletic department responded to a major societal issue and if the position statements and any subsequent actions are sufficient to satisfy the athletic department’s social responsibility. The results will provide insight as to what student and student-athletes expect to see in future position statements or actions taken by the department.