Barriers to Prioritizing Environmental Sustainability in Collegiate Athletics

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Climate change is negatively impacting our environment, and humans play a significant role in these negative impacts (United Nations, 2012). Beyond that, sports fans are the main contributors to the sizeable carbon footprint generated by large sporting and mega-events (Dolf & Teehan, 2015). While exemplar sport organizations are taking steps to reduce their environmental impacts (Casper et al., 2012; McCullough et al., 2016), these premier organizations are the exception rather than the rule. While five US collegiate athletic departments are part of the 150 signatories of the UN’s Sports for Climate Action Framework (2018), a majority of collegiate athletic departments still do not communicate their efforts, at best, or lack commitment to such efforts, at worst (Pelcher et al., 2020).

A review of the literature has shown that much of the focus on environmental sustainability efforts in collegiate sport has been on 1) the current state of environmental sustainability initiatives in collegiate athletics (Casper et al., 2012; Casper & Pfahl, 2015; Pfahl et al., 2015); 2) who is responsible for these initiatives (McCullough et al., 2018; Pelcher & McCullough, 2019; Pfahl et al., 2015); and 3) the motivations as well as the conditions within which it would be optimal to create lasting environmental sustainability initiatives (Casper et al., 2012; Dolf & Teehan, 2015; McCullough et al., 2016). Though researchers have identified constraints, there is a lack of understanding to explain the challenges sport practitioners encounter to implement and prioritize environmental sustainability initiatives within their athletic department. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to determine the barriers to implement environmental sustainability initiatives and the degree to which the barriers exist. This understanding will allow practitioners to effectively inculcate environmental sustainability into strategic plans and advance their sustainability initiatives.

Data for this work in progress will be collected from no less than 15 semi-structured interviews. Our intentional sample primarily targets college and university employees, (i.e., senior administrative athletics staff, campus sustainability officers, facilities services department). The interview guide is informed by the previous practitioner and academic surveys (Casper et al., 2012; Green Sports Alliance, 2016). Specifically, participants will be asked about the specific barriers that they faced or continue to face when implementing environmental sustainability initiatives into their daily operations. Throughout this study, a constructivist (interpretivist) paradigm will be used. The raw data will be analyzed, broken down into emerging themes, and categorized. Steps will be taken to increase trustworthiness and credibility through the use of peer debriefers and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

The results from this study will update the findings of prior literature considering the advances in the sport environmental movement in recent years and serve as a framework for future quantitative surveys of staff and decision-makers involved with collegiate athletic sustainability efforts. The results will provide researchers the opportunities to explore the validity and severity of the constraints mentioned by the participants in this study. Practitioners will benefit from our findings by recognizing common issues that they may encounter with their sustainability initiatives as well as open discussions for practical solutions.