An Examination of College Adaptive Sport Sponsorship Assets and the Role of Cause-Related Marketing

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An increase in adaptive sport programs is in the interest of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as the organization aims to promote and support athletes with disabilities under its five pillars of diversity and inclusion (NCAAa, 2020). Currently, the NCAA has 1,113 member institutions providing athletic opportunities to nearly half a million student-athletes (NCAAb, 2020). However, less than 0.5% offer at least one adaptive sport (ACSSAA, 2020), even though over 19% of the post-secondary student body reports a disability (NCES, 2019). This discrepancy highlights the inequality in sporting opportunities for individuals with disabilities. As Ruddell (2018) states, institutions can gain significant internal and external benefits from offering adaptive sport programs, including the ability to increase and enhance opportunities for the development of Paralympic-eligible individuals (Ackerman & Fay, 2016). Moreover, it provides an opportunity to respond to fans’ call for social responsibility (Walker & Kent, 2009), and avoid the threat of potential lawsuits filed due to unequal opportunity to play under the 1973 Rehab Act (Comerford, 2018).

Unlike their able-bodied counterparts, most college adaptive sports face the challenge of not being housed within the athletic department, and thus, not receiving funding from their college athletic departments (Larkin et al., 2014). Consequently, similar to other niche sports, they are dependent on corporate sponsorship as vital capital for operation (Lough & Irwin, 2001). To expand the offerings, Hansen (2019) argued selling sponsorships is an attainable funding source by auditing assets, assembling a sponsorship package, selling, activating, and retaining the sponsorships. Through the unique landscape of college adaptive sports and the mission-specific focus on inclusion and participation, cause-related marketing (CRM) strategies in sponsorship acquisition provide a potential avenue to increase sponsorship funding. Considering the importance of sponsorship acquisition for adaptive sports (Macdougall et al., 2014), this study’s purpose is to identify collegiate adaptive sports’ unique assets and how the discovered assets can be leveraged through CRM to increase college adaptive sports’ funding via strategic sponsorships.

Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative approach, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with current working professionals in college adaptive sport programs during Fall 2020. A mix of inductive and deductive coding is leveraged to identify themes regarding sponsorship assets, acquisition and CRM opportunities. Findings suggest great opportunity for the use of CRM to increase adaptive sport offering at the collegiate level. This study aims to provide specific recommendations on the use of CRM in sponsorship acquisition. With effective sponsorship programs, intercollegiate adaptive athletic programs can be financially self-sustaining, increase their marketability, and bring awareness of intercollegiate opportunities to future adaptive sport athletes.