Toward a Better Understanding of College Athletic Donors: What Are the Primary Motives?

James M. Gladden, Daniel F. Mahony, Artemisia Apostolopoulou

Abstract

The purpose of the current paper is to help improve our understanding of why people donate money to athletic support groups, which motivations are most prevalent among donors, and how motivations differ across three schools. Four thousand one hundred and thirty-seven responses (from 1,579 athletic support group donors at three universities) to an open-ended question about donor motivation were content analyzed. Results suggest that primary motives include supporting and improving the athletic program, receiving tickets, helping student-athletes, deriving entertainment and enjoyment, supporting and promoting the university (non-athletic programs), receiving membership benefits, repaying past benefits received, helping and enhancing the community, and psychological commitment. Comparisons to past research efforts (and comparisons among the three schools) are discussed and directions for future research are offered.

Introduction

According to the American Association of Fundraising Counsel (AARFC), an estimated $203 billion was donated to charities in the United States in 2000 (American Association of Fundraising Counsel, 2001). Of this extremely large figure, $28.2 billion or 13.9% of this charitable giving was targeted to education (American Association of Fundraising Counsel, 2001). While the monies generated by athletic support groups or booster clubs are usually only a fraction of the larger university's development (i.e., fundraising) operation (Clotfeller, 2001), athletic fundraising accounts for 18% of the total revenue generated by NCAA Division I-A athletic departments (Fulks, 2002). Further, athletic fundraising is often looked to as one of the revenue streams that can still be grown or developed within a college athletic department (Walker, 1994). In fact, donations represented only 5% of the total revenue in the 1960s (Howard & Crompton, 1995), well below the 18% contributed today. Thus, in a time when more than one-half of all Division I college and university athletic departments run a deficit, and the average deficit for these schools is $3.3 million (Suggs, 2000), one can argue that furthering an understanding of why people donate to athletic support groups is important.

Over the past 20 years, significant research efforts have been undertaken to examine college athletic fundraising. Early studies examined the impact of athletic success on donations to both the general university and the school's athletic department (Brooker & Klastorin, 1981; Sigelman & Bookheimer, 1983; Sigelman & Carter, 1979). More recently, and consistent with a research trend in the general fundraising literature (Cermak, File, & Prince, 1994; Harvey, 1990), research on athletic fundraising has attempted to delve deeper and identify the motives underlying the athletic donor's decision to give to an athletic department's fundraising operation (Billing, Holt, & Smith, 1985; Mahony, Gladden, & Funk, 2003; Staurowsky, 2001).
Parkhouse, & Sachs, 1996; Verner, Hecht, & Fansler, 1998). These studies have resulted in scales to measure athletic donor motivations. However, these studies generally did not: (a) utilize extensive open-ended data from actual donors; or (b) explore the prevalence of each individual donor motive. The goal of the current study is to fill in these gaps in the literature.

Challenges Facing Athletic Fundraising

The need for increased sophistication in fundraising efforts is driven by the challenges associated with soliciting charitable donations. As it relates to athletic fundraising in the United States, at least four formidable challenges exist. First, starting in 2001, the first economic downturn in more than a decade occurred, which would naturally cause people to scrutinize discretionary expenditures. Second, there are approximately 600,000 charitable organizations in the US (Kelly, 1997). Given this volume of potential opportunities, it can be argued that competition among charitable organizations is quite significant. Sargeant (2001) found that 26% of all “lapsed” donors (i.e., people that once gave to a charity but no longer do) in the United Kingdom stopped giving to one charity because they felt other causes were more worthy. A third challenge associated with athletic fundraising is that donors do not exhibit a regular habit of giving to educational institutions and the situation does not appear to be improving. In Clotfeller’s (2001) analysis of data from 14 selective colleges and universities (generated in the College and Beyond Survey), he found that the percentage of donors giving money to an educational institution every year for five years was 27.5% among people who graduated in 1951, but was only 12.6% among people who graduated in 1976.

The fourth and final challenge is that athletic fundraising is motivated by a desire to attain priority seating (Hall & Mahony, 1997; Mahony et al., 2003). People “donate” money to an athletic support group in order to receive priority points that determine both the ability to purchase season tickets and the location of those tickets for a school’s athletic contests. For schools with a consistently successful team, the athletic support group benefits from people’s desire to have seats and/or have good seats for those games (Hall & Mahony, 1997). However, as is frequently the case, a school’s teams may experience a periodic or long-term downturn in fortunes that could cause decreased demand for tickets. In this case, donations (as well as gate receipts) for that particular program generally suffer due to decreased demand.

Understanding Donor Motivations

According to Schervish (1997), there are now a “litany of well-documented factors that appear to motivate charitable giving” (p. 111) in the mainstream fundraising literature. The knowledge of such factors is attributable to the efforts of researchers who have identified donor motivations as a means of creating a tool to better segment donors and increases the sophistication of the marketing to donors (Harvey, 1990; Cermak et al., 1994). In perhaps the most comprehensive segmentation effort to date, Prince and File (1994) published the Seven Faces of Philanthropy: A New Approach to Major Donors, a four-phase research protocol with affluent donors that identified seven distinct types of donors: communitarians (focus on community benefits), devout (feel religious need to give), investors (focus on benefits of giving to donor), socialites (focus on socializing benefits), altruists (giving is a responsibility), repayer (focus on giving back), and dynasts (giving is a family tradition).

Athletic Donor Motivations

While work such as Prince and File’s (1994) is successfully moving along research in other areas of fundraising, research on athletic fundraising is still developing. Previous research on intercollegiate fundraising has documented that donor behavior is influenced by priority seating (Hammersmith, 1985; Isherwood, 1986), parking privileges (Isherwood, 1986), special recognition (Isherwood, 1986), social events (Isherwood, 1986), improving the quality and image of the athletic program (Comstock, 1988; Hammersmith, 1985; Webb, 1989), promoting the image of the university and the state (Hammersmith, 1985), and contributing to the academic success of student athletes (Comstock, 1988). However, many of these studies focused on only a few potential motivations rather than attempting to develop a broader understanding of the reasons that donors give money to athletic support groups. Further, none of these studies elicited in-depth open-ended feedback from donors.

To date, there have been four studies that specifically examined a broad range of donor motivations. Billing et al. (1985) created the Athletics Contributions Questionnaire (hereafter referred to as the ACQ). The ACQ identified four potential motives for giving to
athletic support groups: philanthropic (giving to provide scholarships), social (giving so that games can be attended with family and friends), success (of the athletic program), and benefits (such as parking and priority points for tickets that are tied to donations).

Staurowsky et al. (1996) built on the efforts of Billing et al. (1985) in creating the Athletics Contributions Questionnaire Revised Edition II (ACQUIRE II) scale. ACQUIRE II incorporated the four motives from the Billing et al. study (1985) and added two new motives, curiosity (stemming from the donor's interest in athletics and the needs associated with athletics) and power (giving to have an influence over athletic department operations). Factor analysis of the items generated for ACQUIRE II led to the elimination of the curiosity construct and the expansion of the success construct to include: (a) Success I, which was related to supporting the success of the school; and (b) Success II, which was related to the impact of the athletic program on the state and past participation in intercollegiate athletics.

Verner et al. (1998) attempted to further extend the understanding of donor motivations with the creation of the Motivation of Athletic Donors (MAD-I) instrument. Utilizing a four-phase research process, MAD-I incorporated concepts from previous studies in identifying 11 unique donor motivations: participating in secondary events (desire to participate in events only for donors), public recognition (desire for public recognition from the organization), giving of time and energy (desire to be involved beyond a monetary contribution), access to inside information (desire for information not given to non-donors), priority treatment (desires for special benefits), philanthropy (desire to assist in education of athletes), collaboration (desire to work with others toward a common goal), create (desire to bring something new to the athletic program), change (desire to improve or modify something), curiosity (desire to be involved with decision making), and power (desire to have an affect on decision making).

While these studies provide some very important and instructive findings, some limitations do exist. Interestingly, Verner et al. (1998) did not include items related to the success of the athletic program or promotion of the school and/or community in their study, even though these motives had been found to be relevant in prior research. Additionally, as Hall and Mahony (1997) argued, the tie between the donor and the university (not just the athletic department) could represent an important motivation for donating. Similarly, a donor could be motivated to donate by a psychological commitment to an athletic program or school (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000).

Another limitation to prior research is the significant heterogeneity relating to donor motives could be that there is significant heterogeneity among schools. Colleges and universities can differ along a variety of dimensions, including public versus private, Carnegie Research I or not, and commuter versus on-campus student population. Prior research supports this notion. Rhoads and Gerking (2000) found that Carnegie Research I schools that were highly selective in the admissions process tended to generate the highest levels of donations. In fact, in their research, Rhoads and Gerking used a fixed effects model to control for the heterogeneity that they found among universities. Additionally, Harrison, Mitchell, and Peterson (1995) found that schools with higher levels of part-time students experienced lower levels of donations.

Based on these limitations, Mahony et al. (2003) developed an instrument that included 12 different factors thought to motivate donations to athletic support groups. Some of these constructs were examined in prior research (philanthropic, social, benefits, and success). The benefit construct was separated into three different constructs – priority seating for football, priority seating for men's basketball, and business enhancement – because it was argued that the relative affect of each of these motives on individual donors could be different. For example, priority seating for football could be more important for Southeastern Conference members that regularly compete for bids to premier bowl games and national championships than it would be for Conference USA members that do not experience the same level of success in football. Based on Staurowsky et al's (1996) contention that success could be multi-dimensional, Mahony et al. (2003) identified four success factors: (a) past success and image, (b) current success of the program, (c) the affect of a successful program on the university, and (d) the affect of a successful program on the community. Consistent with some of the aforementioned limitations, Mahony et al. (2003) also examined some new motivations, including nostalgia and psychological commitment.

Beyond the fact that it built on past research as well as expanding the scope of dimensions examined, Mahony et al. (2003) offered several other unique con-
tributions. First, it became the first study in the sport literature to examine the relationship between a donor motivation scale and actual donor behavior (amount donated) finding five of the factors related to the amount donated. Secondly, the Mahony et al. study examined a large sample from different schools and as such was able to actually compare and identify differences in motivations between schools. However, there were some limitations with the Mahony et al. research. Perhaps most notably, the regression analyses accounted for less than 20% of the variance at each of the schools, suggesting a variety of motivational factors may exist that have not been uncovered, or that the factors uncovered need further refinement. Thus, it can be argued that there is still a lack of a commonly accepted set of motives that affect donations to athletic support groups.

Purpose of the Study

In order to further the understanding of donor motives, this research employed an open-ended question to solicit feedback from respondents on why they donate to athletic support groups. Rather than directly imposing scale questions on respondents, this research sought feedback from respondents in their own terms.

In doing so, the aim was to supplement the existing knowledge on donor motives. The data also allowed the authors to make some determinations regarding which motives were most prevalent. Thus, the purpose of this study was threefold:

- Add to the understanding of the variety of reasons people give to athletic support groups;
- Assess which motives are most prevalent in influencing the decision to donate to athletic support groups; and
- Compare the motives across different universities.

Methodology

In order to generate a broad base of responses, surveys were sent to donors at three Division I institutions. The institutions were selected based on their geographic location within the US, the location of the campus (i.e., urban vs. rural), conference membership, which sport(s) was the most important to the generation of revenue, whether donors were alumni of the school, and the distance donors lived from the school. Schools were also selected based on their willingness to have their donor base surveyed. Table 1 presents a description of each school based on the factors listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Summary of Institutions Surveyed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School A</strong></td>
<td><strong>School B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of country</td>
<td>West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School location</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary sport</td>
<td>Men’s basketball and football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference type</td>
<td>Mid-major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents that were alumni of the institution</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents that were football season ticket holders</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents that were men’s basketball season ticket holders</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean # of miles that respondents lived from campus</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents that lived within 25 miles of campus</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents that lived more than 250 miles from campus</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2

### Classification Category Descriptions and Sample Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Affiliation (Milne & McDonald, 1999)           | Giving because it allows someone to interact and socialize with others as a means of belonging | “Be a part of a team”  
“Association with a quality program”  
“Associate with athletic department people” |
| Altruist: Doing good feels right (Prince & File, 1994) | Giving is a moral imperative, sense that giving is a responsibility. Look for words/phrases like “duty”, “obligation”. | “It is the thing to do”; “It is what we do”  
“Important to give to a non-profit”  
“Help in some small way”; “To help out”  
“To contribute” |
| Commitment (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000)   | Give because of a commitment or attitudinal loyalty toward the athletic program or university. | “Love [school’s] sports”; “Love the program”  
“Proud to be a contributor” |
| Communitarian: Doing good makes sense (Prince & File, 1994) | Giving is good for business relationships, good for the community, promote the community | “Bring pride and recognition to [city]”  
“Value to state”; “Support local causes”  
“I live here”; “Only show/ticket in town” |
| Dynast: Doing good is a family tradition (Prince & File, 1994) | Family tradition to give to the athletic department. | “Family tradition”  
“Hand tickets down for kids” |
| Entertainment/enjoyment                         | Give because following the specific team provides entertainment or enjoyment. Also includes references to interest or passion for a particular sport. | “Enjoy team sports”  
“Enjoy the two sports we primarily attend”  
“Enjoy/love college sports”; “Love football” |
| Family needs                                    | Giving allows for family interactions, memories, and traditions to be built. Allows for spending of quality time with family members (spouses, children) | “Attending games provides great camaraderie within our family”  
“Being with friends and family” |
| Good cause                                      | Giving because they feel like they are giving to a good cause – or giving to donate | “Worthwhile programs”  
“Athletics as an educational component” |
| Help student-athletes                           | This includes anything related to providing scholarships, helping student-athletes, providing opportunities for student-athletes, education for student-athletes | “Help/support student-athletes”  
“Help student-athletes be successful as people”  
“Help fund scholarships”  
“Education for students” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Membership benefits (also includes the investor set forth by Prince & File, 1994) | Anything that a donor receives other than tickets through membership in the athletic support group. This includes parking benefits and access to recreation facilities.                                      | “Receive the newsletter”  
“Inclusion in special events”  
“Keep parking status”  
“Tax deduction”                                                                  |
| Repayer: Doing good in return (Prince & File, 1994)                      | Someone that has benefited from an institution and now feels an obligation to support the institution.                                                                                                     | “Support my alma mater”  
“Former athlete on athletic scholarship”  
“Children attending [school]”                                                                                                           |
| Socialite: Doing good is fun (Prince & File, 1994)                       | Creates a social network, giving because it provides a platform for socializing with others.                                                                                                               | “Be with friends at games”  
“Social gatherings and friendships”  
“Lots of friends who attend games and travel together”                                                                                     |
| Support and improve the athletic program (and/or specific sport programs) | Giving to help support, fund, build, or promote the athletic program. This includes mentioning specific sports and coaches. This also includes helping with recruiting, facilities, and equipment; and helping to beat rivals                                                                 | “Promote strong athletic program”  
“Provide financial support for the athletic program”  
“Maintain high level of success”                                                                                                           |
| Support and promotion of the college/university                          | Giving to help support a school, or promote it.                                                                                                                                                             | “Help the university by raising the level of the athletic program”  
“Contribute to higher education”                                                                                                           |
| Ticket-oriented                                                          | Anything revolving around access to tickets: get tickets, keep tickets, get better tickets, “have to,” obtain/maintain priority points level, attend games                                                                 | “Get season tickets”  
“Keep season tickets”  
“Priority for basketball tickets”                                                                                                           |
| Miscellaneous                                                             | Reasons that either a) do not fit the above classification, b) are too vague (one word) to properly classify, or c) are not really reasons for giving                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                     |
above as well as the percentage of donors that were football and men's basketball season ticket holders. Based on the findings of Rhoads and Gerking (2000), differences were expected between schools whose primary sport was football versus schools whose primary sport was basketball. In selecting schools that were and were not members of major athletic conferences, we sought to examine differences that may exist based on the prestige of the conference. In defining schools, we termed schools participating in major conferences as those where the conference received bids to major bowl games in football or where they received multiple bids to the NCAA tournament in men's basketball. In contrast, mid-major conferences were ones where members did not receive bids to the major bowl games in football and typically only received one, or at most two, bids to the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

"A desire to help student-athletes was the third most frequently identified athletic donor motivation, with 29.7% of respondents citing it as a primary motive. Responses in this category tended to focus on providing educational opportunities for student-athletes, providing scholarships for student-athletes, and providing some form of educational assistance."

Participation in the survey was voluntary and a separate letter indicating the participant's rights was included. A university Human Subjects Review Committee approved both the letter and the questionnaire. Additionally, each school's agreement to participate in the study was contingent upon maintaining their anonymity in the reporting of the research. Therefore, hereafter the schools will be referred to as School A, School B, and School C. The researchers suggested a minimum sample size necessary for the study, but allowed schools to survey more donors if they so desired. The schools printed and mailed the surveys to their respective donor bases, thus protecting the confidentiality of the donors. A total of 1,781 surveys were returned from donors at the three institutions, with 935 received from School A (19% response rate), 405 received from School B (41% response rate) and 441 received from School C (45% response rate). The response rate at both Schools B and C was good. While the response rate at School A was lower, there were a large number of responses received from School A. A follow-up mailing was not possible due to limited funding available for this study.

**Instrument**

Because prior research relied heavily on quantitative scale-based methods, we decided to solicit open-ended feedback from donors on why they give to athletic support groups. By doing so, the goal was to broaden the types of data collected with respect to athletic donor motivations such that comparisons to prior research could be undertaken. Within a larger, more quantitative-based survey instrument, respondents were asked to write-in the three most important reasons why they give to an athletic support group. Three separate lines were provided to accommodate the respondent noting three different motivations. Across the three schools, 1,579 of the 1,781 respondents who completed the survey entered at least one response to the question. This group of 1,579 respondents served as the basis for the following analysis. Eight hundred and six of the 1,579 respondents were at School A, 362 were at School B, and 411 were at School C. As evidenced by the 4,137 different responses, most of the respondents offered more than one motivation for giving.

**Data Analysis**

The open-ended data was content analyzed in accordance with the standards set forth by Weber (1990). First, the recording unit was defined as the entire thought offered by each respondent on a given line provided within the survey. Second, categories were identified based on literature review presented at the beginning of this paper. Categories were gleaned from past research on athletic support groups as well as the research conducted by Prince and File (1994) associated with the "Seven Faces" study. Categories were deemed to be mutually exclusive. In some cases, the actual entry had to be separated because two (or three) different themes emerged within one sentence. In accordance with Weber (1990), categories of responses were created based on careful reviews of the data by one of the principal investigators. In all, 16 categories were identified for inclusion. These categories, a definition of the category, and a sample response within the category are presented in Table 2. The miscellaneous category captured responses that were either too ambiguous to code or responses that were irrelevant to the question asked. Following the development and definition of categories, two independent coders categorized all 4,137 responses. Initial intercoder reliability was 88.3%. In an effort to improve the intercoder reliability, definitions for each category were further developed and the items where disagreement occurred were recoded. The second coding resulted in an intercoder reliability of 96.5%.

**Results**

Table 3 presents the overall incidence of occurrence for each of the categories of response. Of the 16 response categories, more than 20% of respondents
mentioned five. Four additional response categories were mentioned by at least 20% of respondents at one of the schools. Given that one of the purposes of this study was to understand which athletic donor motivations were most prevalent, these nine categories are the focal point for the remainder of this paper.

"In addition to indicating that some factors from prior research may not be as strong as originally thought, this research helped add to the understanding of what motivations are salient. Strong support was found for the importance of supporting and improving the athletic program."

The desire to support and improve the athletic program was the most often mentioned motivational factor (by 61.8% of all respondents). Additionally, it was the most often identified motive at Schools A and C. Among the variety of program aspects that donors sought to support and/or improve were athletic programs, coaches, facilities, recruiting, and conference membership. Additionally, a significant number of respondents suggested they were giving to help the department and/or specific programs achieve success in competition. The second most often cited motive was the desire to receive ticket-oriented benefits (49.8% of all respondents). This motivation appeared to be particularly important at School B, where 84.0% of all respondents cited ticket benefits as a primary motivation for giving. Responses in this category most often referred to the link between donations and the ability to buy season tickets, keep season tickets, and improve the seat location of season tickets. Additionally, a number of respondents at all three schools mentioned the link between donations and the ability to generate priority points, which are then used to purchase season tickets. Beyond these general trends, a more specific trend emerged at School B. Of the 304 respondents who indicated ticket benefits was a primary motive, 75 (24.7%) indicated at least some feeling they were "forced" to provide a donation. In fact, such negative terms as "extortion," "coercion," "must," and "told to" emerged in respondent comments to the open-ended question.

A desire to help student-athletes was the third most frequently identified athletic donor motivation, with 29.7% of respondents citing it as a primary motive. Responses in this category tended to focus on provid-

Table 3
Frequency of Category Occurrence: Overall and By School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total (N = 1,579)</th>
<th>School A (N = 806)</th>
<th>School B (N = 362)</th>
<th>School C (N = 411)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support and improve the athletic program</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td>87.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket-oriented</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help student-athletes</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/enjoyment</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and promote the university</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership benefits (investor)</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repayer (doing good in return)</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communitarian (doing good makes sense for the community)</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialite (doing good is fun)</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation (doing good is fun)</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family needs</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruist (doing good feels right)</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good cause</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynast (doing good is a family tradition)</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ing educational opportunities for student-athletes, providing scholarships for student-athletes, and providing some form of educational assistance.

Unlike the first three motivations, there were some significant differences among the schools in terms of the fourth most mentioned motive. Responses related to entertainment, enjoyment, and interest were cited by 28.2% of the donors. Responses in this category centered on respondent's enjoyment of attending the school's games, enjoyment of college sports, or enjoyment of attending events as a whole. However, this figure is skewed by the disproportionate number of respondents and significantly higher frequency of response on this item at School A (38.7% of all School A respondents).

The fifth most often mentioned motive was to support and/or promote the university as a whole (21.7%). Responses in this category focused on helping the university grow, promote itself on a national basis, and succeed in general.

While the desire to give to receive membership benefits other than tickets was the sixth most often cited motive overall (15.7%), this incidence is skewed by the high prevalence of mentions at School C, where 36.0% of respondents mentioned it. On further examination of the data, 67.7% of the responses categorized as membership benefits at School C were found to be related to parking privileges. Given that School C was a school that competed in a major football conference and had a large football stadium, it can be suggested that people valued how their donation allowed them to have better parking associated with football games.

The desire to repay for something that had been received in the past, or “repayer” factor (Prince & File, 1994), was the seventh most often identified motive cited by respondents (14.8%), and the seventh most often at Schools A (14.1%) and C (20.2%). Responses in this category included those that donated to “give back,” those that donated because family members attended or were currently attending the school, and those that were seeking to support their alma mater. The prevalence of the communitarian construct was cited by 22.0% of respondents at School A. Responses in this category included mentions of promoting the city/town in question, supporting a community based program, supporting the program because it was a part of the community, as well as business and personnel entertainment purposes. Finally, a personal commitment to the athletic program or school was the ninth most frequently mentioned motive overall (11.5%). Responses in this category included words such as “love,” “pride,” “loyalty,” and “fondness” to describe the school, athletic program, or an individual sport.

Discussion

This study utilized an open-ended question to elicit responses from donors to athletic support groups. This methodology differs significantly in approach from past research on athletic donors that developed scaled items and then tested the reliability of the scales using a survey-based methodology. As such, the results from this study add to the understanding of donor motivations from several perspectives. First, the results of this study allow for comparisons to athletic donor motivations uncovered in prior research. Second, this research provides the second documented effort to determine the primary motives for athletic donors. Third, because this research generated a large volume of open-ended responses across three different sets of athletic donors, it allows for comparisons by school. Discussions related to each of these contributions constitute the remainder of this section.

Comparisons to Prior Research

The analysis of open-ended responses in this study helps lend support to and challenge the existence of constructs derived in prior research efforts. As it relates to the more general fundraising literature, it was interesting that while six of the seven major donor clusters set forth by Prince and File (1994) were present, none of their clusters were one of the five most often cited motives by respondents. This result would seem to support the notion that fundraising in athletics is somewhat different than fundraising in other areas, and thus needs to be examined separately. In addition, there was essentially no mention of power, even though it was a factor identified by both Staurowsky et al. (1996) and Verner et al. (1998). This result would appear to support Mahony et al.'s (2003) suggestion that very few donors truly have any real power, so for a large majority of donors, power is not an important factor. Power may be important to a select few donors, but in a study like this that relies on a large sample of responses, power was not important. Given the support it received in prior research (e.g., Billing et al., 1985; Verner et al., 1998), it was also interesting to find that access to social networks (i.e., “socialite” category) was not often mentioned. This result is important because it tends to suggest that communication strategies geared toward making people feel they are part of an elite group are potentially misguided.

In addition to indicating that some factors from prior research may not be as strong as originally thought, this research helped add to the understanding of what motivations are salient. Strong support was found for the importance of supporting and improving the athletic program. This is consistent with prior
research in athletic fundraising, which all included one or more similar factors (Billing et al., 1985; Mahony et al., 2003; Staurowsky et al., 1996; Verner et al., 1998). It is also consistent with other research on sport fans that focused on the desire of fans to bask in the reflected glory of their favorite teams (e.g., Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976; Mahony, Howard, & Madrigal, 2000). Support was also found for the notion that people may be significantly motivated to give to an athletic support group based on a desire to support and promote the local community and the university. Uncovering support for and interest in helping the community and university is logical given the potential prominence of an athletic program in both. In fact, athletic departments focus on the importance of the athletic program to the community and, particularly, to the university. In addition, individuals like to be associated with success. Prior research has indicated that basking in reflected glory is not limited to sports (e.g., Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986). Individuals may receive similar self and public image benefits if they are associated with a successful community or university.

Clear support was also found for the importance of tangible benefits (e.g., tickets, parking, etc.) to the donor. Again, this was a factor that was included in all of the prior studies on fundraising motives (Billing et al., 1985; Mahony et al., 2003; Staurowsky et al., 1996; Verner et al., 1998). In addition, support was found for the separation of tickets from other membership benefits (as per Mahony et al. 2003). Given the high incidence of responses related to ticket benefits and priority seating, it is clear that this is more often a primary motive than are the other tangible benefits received by the donors. This finding was not surprising given the limited availability of tickets at many college athletic stadiums and arenas, and the significant communication that emanates from athletic support groups to donors regarding the ticket benefits associated with donating. Nor is this finding surprising given the prevalence of priority seating points programs at many Division I programs throughout the country. While such benefits are provided by other non-profits (particularly in the performing arts), the presence of such a direct and valuable tangible benefit as an outcome of a donation is somewhat unique across charitable organizations.

The prevalence of this motive should also serve to generate significant concern for several reasons. First, as was evidenced in the negative responses related to ticket benefits at School B, the use of ticket benefits to provide value associated with donations can create very negative feelings among donors. Nearly one-quarter of all respondents at School B held negative perceptions about the relationship between tickets and donations. Additionally, if such feelings exist, it adds increased pressure for the athletic department, and in particular, its revenue generating sport(s) to be successful in competition. A downturn in fortunes could lead to decreased demand for season tickets that would also result in decreased donations. In order to avoid being overly reliant on athletic team success, the goal of the athletic fundraiser must be to better understand the other reasons that people are motivated to give to athletic departments and programs and to emphasize such benefits. As such, in addition to a distinct category related to tickets, future research should also account for people who are motivated by other membership benefits, such as parking privileges, newsletters, and access to special events. Beyond ticket benefits, these benefits (particularly parking) were still important to at least some of the respondents in the research.

Consistent with prior research (Billing et al., 1985; Mahony et al., 2003; Staurowsky et al., 1996; Verner et al., 1998), support was also found for philanthropic motives, particularly as it relates to certain areas. While less support was found for the more general altruistic motivation for giving (i.e., giving to “do good”), athletic donors clearly have some altruistic motives. However, as is evidenced from an analysis of items used to examine this factor in prior research, there may be multiple dimensions to this category. For example, these data suggest helping student-athletes and repaying the university and athletic program may be distinct and important philanthropic motives. The identification of helping student-athletes as a primary motive was not surprising because athletic departments frequently focus on this in their solicitation materials. Some universities even use the term “education” in their support group name. Nor is it surprising that there is significant support for the repayer construct given the perceived benefits that a school can offer to a student (e.g., scholarship, education, great memories) that serve to create a sense of indebtedness in an individual.

Two other motives that were rarely, if ever, directly identified in prior research on athletic donors, emerged in the current study: entertainment/enjoyment and
commitment. Particularly at School A, there were a significant number of donors who were motivated by the desire to be entertained and the desire to receive personal enjoyment. Given that many of the responses in this category were related to respondents’ enjoyment of events, future research should look at the relationship between this category of motivation and the ticket-related category of motivation. It can be deduced that the donors would not receive enjoyment if they cannot attend and they cannot attend if they do not receive tickets. For the athletic fundraiser, it suggests considering communication strategies that emphasize the atmosphere at games and the enjoyment that can be derived from attending college athletic events.

While it can be suggested that entertainment might be related to, or an outcome of the ability to get tickets, psychological commitment could be an underlying important motivation related to donor giving. This is a motivation that is weaved throughout nearly all of the prior research on athletic donors, but is most directly articulated by Mahony et al. (2003). This research demonstrated that a significant number of donors who feel a very strong emotional connection and/or commitment to the university, athletic program, or a particular team. Athletic fundraisers should attempt to recognize this connection and express genuine appreciation for their commitment and support. Such efforts can range from personal thank you letters from coaches and administrators to special exclusive events for donors.

Between School Differences
A very interesting outcome of this research was the differences that occurred between schools with respect to the importance of the various donor motivations. Examining Table 3 from both an overall ranking perspective and frequency of response perspective, there are some notable differences among the three schools studied. Such differences have significant implications for both researchers and practitioners. These differences are not generalizable to all schools that fit the descriptions listed in Table 1. Rather, this research suggests that care should be taken to understand the unique environmental factors that exist at each school. Further, future research should strive to increase the number of schools studied such that an even greater understanding of the heterogeneity among schools is achieved.

At School C, the most often cited motive was to support and improve the athletic department. This motive was cited more than twice as frequently as any other motive. As such, it was a stronger motive for donors at School C than it was at Schools A and B. Several factors may have accounted for this difference. First, this research was conducted during a highly successful football season, so there is potential that the goodwill from this season carried over to the survey responses. Second, it is interesting to note that School C was the only one of the three schools where football was the “primary” sport. A possible explanation is that with football’s naturally occurring games on weekends, it serves as a much more effective tool at bringing people to campus en masse and demonstrating how donations can be used. A third explanation may be that School C was also the only school located in a small college town. Hall and Mahony (1997) suggested that location of the institution was an important factor in athletic fundraising. A fourth explanation for this difference may be that donors at School C are more committed fans, as evidenced by the fact that they were more likely to be alumni of the school (88.5%), do not live close to the school (62.2% live more than 250 miles from the school), but still have extremely high incidences of season ticket ownership (99.7% for football and 96.1% for men’s basketball). Based on the current study, an interesting direction for future research would be to explore whether rural campuses have advantages over urban campuses in generating emotions (such as nostalgia) that are more effective in stimulating certain motivations to give. Further, these findings also suggest an examination of the links between commitment and being an alumnus of the university.

Respondents at School A were more likely to cite the desire to help their surrounding community as a primary motive. It was not surprising that this response was so low at School C given its proximity in a rural area. In contrast, School A exists in a city of nearly 900,000 people, and respondents suggested they supported the program because it was a community-based program and because it plays an integral role in promoting the city. However, it was surprising that 22.0% of respondents at School A cited this reason, but only 11.0% of respondents at School B cited this as a motive, given that School B is also located in an urban market (with a similar population base to School A). This suggests that there may also be some differences within urban universities.

The difference could be due to the extremely high emphasis that donors at School B placed on receiving ticket benefits. While 84.0% of respondents at School B cited ticket benefits as a motive for giving, only 42.1% of donors at School A cited ticket benefits as a motive. School B possesses a much more significant tradition related to the “major” sport at both schools — men’s basketball — in that it has been a national power in the sport. Accordingly, tickets could be in greater demand at School B. It would be interesting to content analyze the communications from each school’s athletic department to its donors to determine if access to tick-
ents was a more prevalent message in the communications at School B.

The differences between schools with respect to the entertainment/enjoyment motive were also intriguing. Respondents at School A (38.7%) were much more likely to cite this motive than respondents at Schools B (10.5%) or C (18.0%). One potential reason for such a high incidence at School A is that the school represents, as some respondents put it, “the only show in town,” and in the case of School A, the city is sizable. While School B is also in an urban market, it competes with both a very successful AAA minor league baseball team and a more prominent state university in the same state. For these reasons, School B’s donors might not view their sports teams as the only entertainment option in town.

Implications for College Athletics Marketers

This analysis of open-ended responses has significant implications for college athletics marketers. While priority point systems are a financial necessity at most Division I schools, this research suggests sport marketers must be very careful to not over-emphasize the ticket benefits associated with giving. Such a strategy may engender negative feelings (e.g., “I am coerced to give”) and inadvertently connect levels of giving to athletic performance. Perhaps even more importantly, such feelings could harm the donor’s long-term relationship with the athletic department.

Instead, sport marketers may want to focus on the intangible and altruistic motivations that were prevalent in this study and supportive of past research. By stressing the importance of donations to helping the athletic department and university grow and succeed, the donor might be more likely to develop a more loyal and consistent relationship with the athletic department. Similarly, messaging related to how donations help scholar-athletes succeed can help donors see the necessity of consistent donations as well as help them feel good about their donations. A focus on non-ticket-related benefits, such as parking privileges or access to university facilities could also be stressed as a group of respondents cited the importance of such benefits as a motive for giving.

Finally, collegiate sport marketers should realize that each college/university may be unique and because of this, the importance of the various motivations may differ significantly by school. For example, there may be differences in motivations depending on whether the university competes in Division I-A football in a “major” conference. Similarly, the degree to which the university’s athletic events are perceived to provide entertainment or are integral to creating an image for the community are likely to differ depending on the school. At the very least this research suggests there are probably some differences in motivations depending on whether the school is located in an urban or rural setting. Therefore, care must be taken to generalize the importance or salience of donor motivations across all schools. This research suggests that studying donor motives at each individual school is definitely warranted.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations associated with this research that bear mentioning. First, the way in which this data was collected asked respondents to identify the reasons that they donated to athletic support groups. Top-of-mind reasons for donating were offered. However, this research was based on one question and was asked as part of a larger mail survey methodology, so there was no opportunity to probe respondents about their responses. Therefore, there may be categories representing deeper levels of motivation that could be underrepresented. For example, psychological commitment may actually be a more prevalent motive than was indicated in this research. Future quantitative efforts examining donor motivations should include items to represent some of the constructs that were not as salient in this research, but could be theoretically argued as important.

Alternatively, depth interviewing with individual donors could help uncover the salience of deeper, subconscious, or socially desirable motivations.

Social desirability bias may have affected the frequency with which some categories of motivation were mentioned. For example, the authors were surprised that power and the social nature of attending athletic events were not more salient in the minds of athletic donors. A reason for this could be that admitting to the importance of such a motivation might not be socially desirable for someone that considers him or herself a “die-hard” fan. In order to determine whether this limitation existed, in-depth qualitative interviews could be useful.

Beyond the research directions suggested in the discussion of the findings and limitations, other potentially importance research directions exist. For example, research could examine the motivational differences based on the year of graduation for alums of a particular school. As Clotfeller (2001) noted, older graduates were more likely to give than younger graduates. It would thus be important to determine if the rate of athletic giving increases as a donor ages. This also raises the prospects of surveying people that are fans of a college athletic program or team, but do not give to the athletic department. Such research might allow practitioners to focus on several key motivators that are integral to transforming a fan into a donor.
Conclusion

Overall, this is still another step in improving our understanding of intercollegiate athletics donor motivation. It allows us to make some suggestions to current athletic fundraisers. Moreover, it provides some direction for future research in this area. In particular, the findings regarding the importance of various motives and differences across institutions suggest that each institution may be unique. Thus, the challenge of future studies is to develop the understanding of donor motives at a wider variety of schools. With fundraising becoming such a critical element in intercollegiate athletics funding, a more thorough understanding of donor motives is important for current and future athletic fundraisers.

References


