

DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN COLLEGE FOOTBALL BOWL GAMES

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ABSTRACT

With new college football bowl games continuing to be developed, the importance for each of these organizations to impact a variety of stakeholders, develop social capital, provide economic development, and educational opportunities will be imperative for community buy-in and ultimately their overall success. College football bowl games garner a great deal of attention for a wide range of topics including economic impact, business aspects, student athlete issues, and legal topics (Darling, 1999; Fizek & McNeil, 2017; Schrotenboar, 2017; Southall, Southall, & Dwyer, 2009; Tobolowsky & Lowery, 2014). While bowl games have produced large amounts of attention, the ability of a bowl game to provide social change and build social capital within a community has been often overlooked. Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe (2016) discussed individual and community level outcomes of the social integration of sport into society. The New Mexico Bowl has established itself as a community event and its ongoing efforts to be innovative in its approach to providing a high-quality event for its stakeholders. This paper discusses the importance of developing social capital utilizing Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory and Putnam's (2000) explanation of social capital.

Keywords: College Football, Bowl Game, Financial Literacy, Community Development.

OVERVIEW OF COLLEGE BOWL GAMES

American college football bowl season kicks-off during the final two weeks of December, with ESPN's "Bowl Mania." The joyous time of the year for most fans of college sports, because there is football game on every night of the week for two weeks, feeding the American sport fans fascination with football as sporting entertainment on television. When football is on television people tune in to watch, even if it is one of the "lower-tier" bowls that drew over 1 million viewers (Schlereth, 2018). Clint Over by, Vice President for ESPN Events said "the bowl system is really healthy," based on the increasing revenues seen by bowl games, substantial pay outs to participating institutions, and increasing number of television viewers, Over by may have a point (Schrotenboar, 2017). A review of financial records of non-profit bowl games displayed some bowls producing well over \$10 million dollars in surplus revenue annually. Financially, bowl games are healthy despite critics claiming there are too many bowl games and possibly leading to a dilution of the product (Schrotenboar, 2017).

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The bowl industry is divided into two segments, non-profit and for-profit bowl games. According to the Football Bowl Association, a professional association for bowl games, there were 41 bowl games in the 2017 bowl season. ESPN owns and operates 13 bowl games, including the New Mexico Bowl operating the bowls from a “for-profit” perspective. All other bowl games operate as a non-profit and are only affiliated with ESPN or ABC via a broadcast rights agreement. There are noticeable differences between the two organizational compositions.

NON-PROFIT BOWL GAMES

The central mission of for-profit and non-profit bowl games is similar; they both are focused on the development and execution of a large sporting event. The difference rest in the organization’s ability to generate a profit and who is the beneficiary of the profit. Most bowl games are operated by non-profit organizations, similar to the way PGA Tour events are managed. The Board of Directors is responsible for the hiring and firing of the Bowl’s Executive Director and works to “recruit” a team to play in its bowl. The team recruiting element of a Board of Directors is lower due to the classification/ranking system employed by many conferences to manage their allotted bowl tie-ins.

Bowl games must be certified by the NCAA and arrange contracts with conferences to be a tie-in to their game. An example would be the Rose Bowl who has tie-ins with the Big Ten and Pac-12 conferences for teams, outside of when they are one of the two national semi-final games for the College Football Playoff. Most non-profit bowls have been in existence for a significant amount of time, with the exclusion of a few games that have been created to generate additional economic impact and revenue by organizations like the Florida Citrus Sports Association, their creation of the Camping World Bowl to augment the long-standing Citrus Bowl.

Most non-profit bowl boards of directors are made up of local business members, community influencers, and sponsors. The Board of Directors are typically large compared to your traditional non-profit because board members usually have a commitment to selling a select number of tickets and dedicate a certain amount of time and resources to various activities. In return for their service, they have the ability to serve on committees within the Board that provide governance of the bowl. The relationship with the bowl is not necessarily one of pure service as seen with traditional non-profits. The non-profit and for-profit models each have their own focuses and have shown they can achieve their organizational goals.

FOR-PROFIT BOWL GAMES

The for-profit bowl games account for the 13 bowls owned and operated by ESPN. The bowls are played in the first week of “Bowl Mania” and include bowls like the New Mexico Bowl, Las Vegas Bowl, Heart of Dallas Bowl, and others. The industry assumptions of these bowls are they are lower-tier and have added to the proliferation of post-season bowl games, however the contrary is being seen in the millions of people who tune into ESPN consuming the product and the numerous experiences offered to student-athletes (Schrotenboar, 2017). The rationale for ESPN creating its own programming is simple, it is a smart business decision.

Dosh (2013) discussed the meteoric rise in media rights fees seen across college sports, leaving ESPN at a strategic disadvantage according to the resource-based perspective of strategic management. Barney (1996) discussed the resource-based theory of a firm and a need for a firm to control its resources that go into executing its product. ESPN creating its own programming is an attempt to vertically integrate its supply chain, making for an efficient use of organizational resources toward its core product. Financial records for ESPN's bowls are not public record, based on financial records of similar sized non-profit bowls, they can probably execute a bowl game for approximately \$1 million compared to paying \$5 million dollars to air a bowl property out of their ownership. Out of the 41 bowl games played in 2017, ESPN and its sister networks (ESPN 2 & ABC) broadcast 36 of the games, including the College Football Playoff which ESPN paid \$7.3 billion in 2015 for the broadcast rights, a step to become the dominant force in live college sport broadcasting (Gaines & Nudelman, 2017; Pallotta, 2015). The significant ratings and viewership of the College Football Playoff and its other college football programming during Bowl Season left Mike Soltys, ESPN's Vice President of Communications to say, "we're thrilled with the results" (Gaines & Nudelman, 2017). The Bowl Season was created by ESPN to give them similar programming as the Super Bowl. While the Super Bowl may draw more for a single event, ESPN has created a two-week platform of programming to increase sponsorship visibility and build up to the culmination of the season with the College Football National Championship game.

ESPN's business model owning and operating its own bowl games is grounded in the ability to create a product at an efficient cost point that can attract sponsors for both the game and its broadcast. ESPN saw an average of 5 million viewers and increase of 12% over previous years across all 36 games it broadcast including an uptick in key demographics of 18-34-year-old men (Yoder, 2018). Live sport programming can bring in viewers and offers a unified platform for a sponsor to use to communicate its brand to its target market for a two week period; whereas a show like the Big Bang Theory may draw 12 million viewers, but is once a week (Otterson, 2018; Yoder, 2018). ESPN has a substantial investment in college football and plays a big factor in team assignments to bowls, to build compelling matchups for television. These matchups may not necessarily be the most logical geographic matchup because ESPN is more concerned with television ratings and not necessarily butts in seats at the game. "As long as Disney has that much invested in the current bowl structure, it's not going to matter if stadiums are 95% full or 45% full because it's all about the television ratings, they are being operated by a television company after all" (Yoder, 2018).

One primary concern of ESPN owned, and operated bowl games is their ability to overcome the stigma passed along to them by the industry and retain title sponsors for their games (Schlereth, 2018). In 2017, ESPN moved one of its properties, the Miami Beach Bowl, to Frisco, Texas. Miami was crowded marketplace for bowl games, with the Orange Bowl and the Boca Raton Bowl (an ESPN Property) located within the general vicinity of each property. There is an adage, "the grass is greener closer to the spicket." The analogy is applied to sponsorship sales and it is true when you examine title sponsors of bowl games. The Valero Alamo Bowl located in San Antonio, Texas has the title sponsor of Valero who is headquartered in San Antonio. A second example is the Auto Zone Liberty Bowl, who has Auto Zone as its sponsor and they are located in Memphis, Tennessee.

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ESPN bowls are often located in locations that lack a large corporate headquarters and typically reside in high tourist areas but appear to still be able to retain title sponsorships. Sponsorships are critical to the success of any event, however for a bowl game, they are essential because it offsets the overall cost associated with team payouts (Fizel & McNeil, 2017). The business model of ESPN Bowls differs from non-profit bowl games, specifically on the focus of in-game attendance and organizational governance, but the contrasting model could prove to potentially be seen by other television networks as a viable model for their content.

NEW MEXICO BOWL

The New Mexico bowl was founded in 2006 with the mission of bringing a bowl game to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Thus, filling the need for an expanding Mountain West conference, who had bowl eligible teams but were left out of the bowl post-season because there were not enough bowl games to fit the need. Over the past 12 years, the New Mexico Bowl has increased its prominence within the Albuquerque and New Mexico communities. Executive Director, Jeff Siembieda has continually stressed the importance of making the New Mexico Bowl a community event, building relationships around the state of New Mexico and within Albuquerque. The Board of Directors for the New Mexico Bowl is made up of influential people from within Albuquerque and New Mexico, providing for a means for participants of the bowl to engage with the whole state of New Mexico.

The Board of Directors for the New Mexico Bowl is not like a non-profit bowl, the Board of Directors has no governance role with the Bowl. The Board operates similar to a “social club” with its members paying a fee to join, giving them access to exclusive member benefits and tickets to the bowl, but still serving the community at large through various activities. While the Board of Directors does not have a governance role, they do have a great opportunity to engage with the Bowl in a variety of ways and many of the Board Members have been with the bowl for numerous years, including a group that started the bowl.

BOWL WEEK ACTIVITIES

The Bowl game occurs on the first Saturday of “Bowl Season” on ESPN. The week’s festivities begin on Wednesday when the teams arrive in Albuquerque. The teams are greeted at the airport by a Mariachi band, bowl staff and board members. After the teams get checked into their hotel, they depart for the bowl’s welcome party hosted at a local entertainment center. The teams have an opportunity to play arcade games, bowl, play laser tag, and other activities with their own team as well as players from the other team. One of the hallmarks of the bowl is its ability to craft activities for players to have a great experience and interact with other players and providing them with an educational opportunity.

Thursday is focused on community engagement. The first community engagement activity is a trip to the Isleta Pueblo Elementary School. The Isleta Pueblo is one of the four Native American reservations surrounding Albuquerque and is the host to bowl game’s Kickoff Luncheon. Beyond the elementary school visit, the players visit The University of New Mexico Hospital’s children’s wing, where they deliver toys and other goodies to lighten the children’s spirits. The player’s engagement at the elementary school and hospital provides an educational experience, leaving the players with a better sense of their role in society and how

they can make an impact. After engaging with the community, the teams take part in a dinner where they compete in a friendly competition between one another.

Friday features the bowl's annual Kickoff Luncheon featuring both teams, fans, the school's marching bands, and a celebrity keynote speaker. The Luncheon host approximately 750 people and has featured Warren Moon, Jim Kelly, and Lou Holtz. The teams share a lunch and a good time before settling into final game preparations. After the Kickoff Luncheon, the bowl hosts a pep rally in Old Town Albuquerque for fans and the community featuring a battle of the bands.

Saturday features the game but there is a Fan Fest that accompanies the game. According to the bowl, the Fan Fest sees between 10-15,000 of the spectators there for the game. The Fan Fest includes a Santa Clause for spectators to get into the holiday spirit, dance teams to embrace the local culture, and other activities that are unique to New Mexico. The participating schools are actively engaged in Fan Fest through alumni tents, spirit squad demonstrations, and pep band performances.

Over its twelve-year existence, the New Mexico Bowl has managed to build itself into a community event getting the whole community to buy into its activities. The New Mexico Bowl has been able to generate a positive economic impact to Albuquerque and New Mexico since its establishment (Barnes & Ballou, 2014). This leads to the discussion of how the New Mexico Bowl impacts individual and community stakeholders in a developmental manner.

NEW MEXICO BOWL DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES

The New Mexico Bowl is a force for development amongst its stakeholders through two programs. The first program is titled Recognition Rows is an attempt to be a catalyst for development within the Albuquerque community. The second program is a financial literacy program, seeking to provide an impact for student-athletes participating in the bowl. The programs will be described in detail, highlighting how they impact community stakeholders.

RECOGNITION ROWS

In an attempt to build relationships with the community, The New Mexico Bowl sought additional opportunities to increase sponsors and increase their citizenship behavior toward the local community. The idea for a program that focused on small businesses within the community as new partners of the bowl, previously overlooked because they do not have the financial capital to spend on high priced sport sponsorships (Gardner & Shuman, 1988). Schlereth (2017) discovered small business owners typically do not seek partnerships with sport organizations because they do not see a fit with their business. The Bowl wanted to approach the relationship with the small businesses providing them with unique value and leveraging the prominence of a sport organization to build a relationship with community stakeholders.

After the New Mexico Bowl was on-board with the program, a relationship was established with the United Way of Central New Mexico. The Bowl was seeking an opportunity to partner with a local non-profit to create a program to promote the non-profits actions through the game with the support of local small businesses. The United Way of Central New Mexico has a center dedicated to non-profits, the Center for Non-Profit Excellence, a promotional flyer was distributed via their listserv with an online form for non-profit organizations to dictate their intention to partner with the bowl. After the initial research phase, the Executive Director of the United Way for Central New Mexico reached out to the Bowl

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because they had a partner who potentially would be a good fit for the Bowl's program. The partner was the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Community Schools program (ABC Program).

The ABC Program is an agency of Bernalillo County developed to enhance the school system through community centric programming. They have programs that focus on student attendance and academic performance. The ABC Program was focused on increasing attendance at schools and sought a similar mission to the Bowl, butts in seats and forwarding the slogan "attendance matters." The Bowl sought to build a partnership and bring increased awareness to the graduation rate of 67.9 percent in Albuquerque Public Schools (Albuquerque Public Schools, 2018). Working with the Executive Director of the ABC Program, Jose Munoz, the Bowl developed the Recognition Rows program.

The Recognition Rows program was focused on rewarding high school students from the Albuquerque Public School system who displayed a positive increase in their school attendance. The ABC Program had a coordinator in 30 schools within the district including 6 high schools. They were responsible for organizing and finding the students. The Bowl was responsible for the sale of sponsorships and executing other aspects of the program. Small businesses were targeted for sponsorships, with a sponsor receiving on-field recognition during game, logo on the t-shirt given to students, logo in game program, and 4 premium seats to the game. In its initial year, the Bowl and the ABC Program were able to send 140 students to the game and had developed a partnership with 4 small businesses. The program received a warm reception from the community and generated a four-figure increase in sponsorship revenue for the bowl.

Bridging Theory and Practice

Putnam (2000) described social capital as either bridging or bonding individuals. The Recognition Rows program serves both of Putnam's perspectives of social capital development. The program serves the ability to bridge or bring together small businesses that commonly would not seek an opportunity to form a partnership with a sport organization, because it did not fit their business model. The association of their brand with the New Mexico Bowl presents a unique way for them to affix their brand to a trusted organization within the community. Working in reciprocal manner, the Bowl is leveraging its standing within the community to build a relationship with new community stakeholders, bridging its connection to small businesses, who have been shown to have a closer relationship with their community and an ability to build social capital (Niehm, Swinney & Miller, 2008).

The Bowl is leveraging Putnam's bonding social capital through its actions with the students and their families. The ability to give the students a "college experience," and most of the students had never attended a college sporting event before the game will forever have a memory of their first event. The action of bringing them to the game is an attempt to build a bond with the students and their families enhancing the reputation and relationship they have with the Bowl. The actions of the Bowl in the development of the Recognition Rows program is grounded in its intention to develop relationships, a hallmark of stakeholder theory.

Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory stressed the importance of building relationships and the action of the Bowl to build relationships with local families and small businesses could prove to be fruitful moving forward for the Bowl.

Freeman and Liedtka (1997) noted the symbiotic relationship between financial performance of an organization and the organization operating under the managerial mindset. A common critique of social responsibility and stakeholder theory is an organization's deviation from profit maximization, but scholars have noted financial performance of an organization where for every dollar invested in a socially responsible initiative, there is at least a \$1.5 dollar return, so doing good is also financially good for the organization (Cochran & Wood, 1984; Godfrey, 2005; Hillman & Keim, 2001). Working closely with the Bowl's staff has shown their motivation to be that of building relationships first as it leads to a long-lasting relationship with stakeholders and trying to derive the greatest amount of value year-round and not just during the week of the event.

FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAM

The 2017 New Mexico Bowl proved to be a pioneering year for the Bowl, because it was the first bowl to engage in life skill educational programming for its participants. Typically, most bowls engage in cultural and social educational programming through showing the players around the city, introducing immersing them in the local culture and engaging in community service opportunities. The New Mexico Bowl took a step toward providing new educational programming student-athletes can apply to enhance their lives beyond playing in the bowl.

Athlete financial literacy and life skill development is a trendy topic in college athletics, typically finding student-athletes are not provided meaningful skills to positively impact their potential employability and life after playing sports (Carr & Bauman, 1996; Goddard, 2004). Jeff Siembieda began to find a partner to aid in the execution of the financial literacy program. U.S. Bank came forward as a willing partner for the Bowl's financial literacy program.

Securing U.S. Bank as a partner for the program was significant for the Bowl, because it meant instant credibility for the financial literacy educational programming coming from a banking institution. U.S. Bank paid a sponsorship fee for the right to put on the financial literacy seminar for student-athletes, an opportunity for the Bowl to do good for its stakeholders and gain revenue for the organization. The resulting event for the student-athlete proved to be a rewarding and educational event.

The financial literacy seminar was held on Thursday of Bowl week in two sessions at the team hotels, to best accommodate the team's practice and event schedules. The financial literacy seminar was not mandatory event for the athletes, but each team had approximately 50-60 players in the session. Siembieda was thrilled with the turnout saying, "I was expecting 20-30 and that is what I told U.S. Bank." U.S. Bank's President for New Mexico was on-site for the seminar and left saying, "wow, what a great event, we loved the experience and were blown away with the attendance".

One of the primary questions was how did they players receive and engage in the seminar? The players were engaged in the material, U.S. Bank tailored the case studies used in the seminar to meet the needs of student-athletes in their current place in life. The student-athletes exited the room after the seminar discussing their experiences saying, "that was awesome" and "I didn't know all that about my finances." The seminar was a new type of educational opportunity for student-athletes at bowl games, earning the New Mexico Bowl the reputation as an innovative bowl within the industry.

Bridging Theory and Practice

Burnett (2010) described sport for development activities that provide opportunities for education. The Bowl worked to develop educational opportunities for student-athletes in a manner that fostered their ability to learn in a non-traditional setting. Schulenkorf (2016) discussed the “limited amount of research conducted on livelihoods” and encouraged scholars to conduct research on job skill training and other others of development for individuals. Most scholars have attempted to examine sport-for-development from a community level, overlooking individual impact an action in direct contrast to McVea and Freeman’s (2005) approach to stakeholder theory (Mair & Whitford, 2013; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2013). In conclusion, the Bowl has developed a new form of educational programming, providing an example to bridge theory and practice in individual value generation and sport-for-development.

DISCUSSION

The New Mexico Bowl is one of the innovative bowl games within the industry, continually pushing the paradigm of how a bowl game can serve as a developmental force for good amongst its stakeholders. Bowl games are unique because of their ability to bring a community together around a central cause. They differ when compared to a normal weekly college football game, because that game only attracts fans from each team and the community may not be fully involved in the same manner as witnessed with a bowl game.

Bowl games are strategically positioned to be a force for value generation. From their inception as events to spur tourism, value generation has been at the core of a bowls mission. The Orange Bowl has existed since the 1930’s and has contributed millions back to the Miami community through various programs supporting youth sport. Bowl games can be a force for good, but they must be accepted by the community and it takes time. One of the primary reasons Jeff Siembieda was and still is interested in community development programs is because the community is now buying into the New Mexico Bowl and treating it as an annual event for celebration of New Mexico. Siembieda said “we are in our 12th year and believe we are finally getting to a point where the community and state are buying into the event.” The New Mexico Bowl is a possible case for future events and sport organizations to examine in the development of programming for that can provide value for a variety of stakeholders and serve as a force of development within its community.

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