

HOW DIVISION I ATHLETICS CAN IMPROVE REPUTATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The benefits of a Division I Athletics program are far reaching. Some of the benefits include an improvement of a university's reputation and its quality of applicants and an opportunity to unite students, alumni, and community members. At Binghamton University, there is a wonderful opportunity to use the varsity sports program for social networking. On the brink of a season in which the men's basketball team reached the NCAA tournament for the first time in school history, excitement surrounding the university and its sports program has never been greater. Now is the time to implement programs that will use the sports program at the university to improve networking and build relationships between students, alumni, and community members.

Keywords: Division I Athletics; Social Networking; Communication; Reputation; Relationships

Binghamton Keywords: Bearcats; Events Center; Binghamton Mets; Binghamton Senators

I. INTRODUCTION

The city of Binghamton and the surrounding area has a great deal to offer its visitors and residents. However, Binghamton University students, and even many community members, are unaware of all of the things that make the city fun, interesting, unique, and a potentially great place to live. Improved communication and more interaction between Binghamton University students, community members, faculty members, and alumni would help improve the general knowledge and bolster the reputation of the city and the surrounding area.

A lack of communication and social networking has contributed significantly to a somewhat negative perception of the city of Binghamton by many Binghamton University students. Under the current circumstances, this negative perception held by the students does not generally change after graduation. Many Binghamton University students know that they do not want to live in the city of Binghamton after school, though they are not quite sure why. Many say that there is "nothing to do" or that the weather is not favorable. Nothing can be done to change the latter. However, according to many Binghamton natives, all anyone could ever want to do is available in or near Binghamton. This even includes going to a sandy beach.

There are many different factors that people consider when they are deciding which community to live in. These factors include, but are not limited to, a good job, a nice house, a strong social scene, and general "energy" of the town. Aside from the university, Binghamton also has an excellent reputation for employment opportunities in engineering. The city does not have much trouble recruiting engineers to stay in the area, as was made clear by the class's

panel discussion at Lockheed Martin. Chanda Guth, a recruiting specialist at Lockheed Martin, claimed that Binghamton was the top feeder school to the Owego division of the company. However, stronger efforts are needed to increase the number of local opportunities for non-engineers. Greater attention should also be given to improving the retention rate of the well-qualified engineers that B.U. produces.

There is a wealth of "raw materials" in the nearby area. Many other prestigious colleges and universities surround Binghamton University. Any graduate of one of these nearby schools, which all experience similar weather to Binghamton, should consider Binghamton as a prime destination to live in and an excellent place to begin their careers, according to Dr. Angelo Mastrangelo of Binghamton University's School of Management (Mastrangelo).

To avoid losing these students to an area that is perceived as more appealing, but in reality may not offer the same benefits as living in Binghamton (i.e. low cost property, beautiful outdoors), an improvement in general communication is needed. Through social networking, this problem can be fixed. Athletic events, for example, provide great opportunities for social networking which have not been tapped to the full extent of their potential at Binghamton University. A few other areas where similar networking opportunities exist are the University's debate team, music department, and SIFE competitions.

How a Division I Athletic program can help improve university support:

Basketball games, as an example, offer much of what is needed to accomplish the goal of improving alumni and community support for a university. Community members showed passionate and unprecedented support for Binghamton University's men's basketball team during the 2008-09 season. The first sellout game in school history came over winter break when a majority of B.U. students were at home. As a result, the Events Center on Binghamton's campus was filled predominantly by community members. It is no coincidence that this boost in attendance came during the Bearcats' most successful season in school history.

There is also growing interest among the student body and professional staff in the athletics program at Binghamton University. Joel Thirer, the Binghamton University Director of Health, Physical Education, and Athletics already sees the positive impact that a competitive team is having on the school's relationship with the community. "You can't go anywhere in town without people coming up to you saying that this is great for the community," he said. "When I first got here in 1989, this wasn't a college town. This was a town with a college in it. I have seen a steady progression where the town has really come to grow their appreciation for the University" (Wolin).

The findings of Budig (2007) back up Thirer's thoughts. He found that Division I athletic programs encourage community members and alumni to unite with the university. This is due in large part to the positive publicity that schools give to their athletics teams and the constant promotion of their events. Also, intercollegiate athletic events are some of the most popular means of large-scale entertainment in the country (Hill 2001). Later, it will be explained how excitement surrounding a sports program can boost the reputation of the school.

High profile athletics also assist in giving "a face" to the university. People like to feel a personal connection to a school and star players, coaches, and mascots. Especially on a winning team, the success associated with a star player will also then be associated with the university itself (Toma 1999). It is also easy for fans to feel attached to star athletes who appear who to do the impossible on their respective playing fields.

A successful athletic team that competes in a large arena may also boost the local economy. It provides local entertainment and attracts alumni support. As alumni are drawn back to campus for games, they will also spend their money in the local area. Since, as previously stated, Division I athletics help unite community members with the university, graduates will be more likely to stay in the area after graduation if they have had the opportunity to become familiar with areas and people outside of the university.

Sporting events provide a reason for people who would not otherwise visit a university to go on campus. Those who are not initially interested in taking advantage of what a nearby university has to offer will be exposed to its offerings and, in turn, mix with alumni and students. Sporting events then give these people a reason and the opportunity to get involved with the university (Toma 1999). People who attend these sporting events and support their team will become emotionally attached to the university itself, not just its sports teams. They will develop pride in their local university. Having Division I athletic teams also can increase awareness of a college campus as a community resource and a public good (Kezar 2004). If a community member, who is a fan of the arts, attends a football game and has a good time, he or she may become interested in helping out with art shows on campus. Thanks to the increased awareness of the university by the community members, they may try to hold community events on campus and therefore integrate the community with the university. A competitive sports team will also serve as a common topic of interest between university students and local community members.

How sports help the university's reputation:

Interest in a university's sports teams often translates into interest in the university itself. People view a university in the same light as they view the university's athletic programs (Toma 1999). In other words, a successful athletic program with a strong reputation will yield a general feeling of success towards the university as a whole. People want to be a part of something that they feel is successful. The benefits are far-reaching. Integration at athletic events could assist with attracting a more competitive pool of applicants to the university as well.

Furthermore, a university's reputation is perceived by many as an indication of the university's quality of education (Brooks 2005). Since a competitive sports team can boost the reputation of a school, sports can actually boost the perception that a given school has strong academics as well. The most competitive universities in America are not necessarily those with the best quality of education, but rather those with the best overall reputation. This is not inherently "wrong," since a university has much more to offer than just a classroom education, such as a social network, a fun environment, an ability to supply students with connections to assist in getting a job after school, and much more.

Another way that a school can boost its reputation is if a graduate becomes well known and successful. If a university has a famous graduate, such as a well-known CEO or entertainer, the success of the individual will be associated with the school itself. Gump (2006) explains that university prestige can be attributed to association, meaning that an individual that associates a successful person with a university will have a positive outlook on the university. That being said, having a competitive sports program gives the school the opportunity to be associated with someone who becomes well known across the country for his or her athletic performances. Also, if the athlete goes on to play professionally, this will also help the university's reputation and exposure.

Commercialization of the university through athletics:

Successful Division I athletic programs, as opposed to Division II and III programs, will get more exposure and have the opportunity to be commercialized (Kezar 2004). Binghamton University's Associate Director of Athletics, Jason Sigel, says that "We [at Binghamton University] usually made phone calls to corporations [for partnerships and sponsorships]. Now, the phone calls are coming to us." This drastic change that Sigel speaks of took place during the Bearcats' America East Conference Tournament and NCAA Tournament run.

T-shirts with university logos are sold in retail stores across the country. Many of the shirts are sold to consumers who are fans of the university's sports teams as opposed to students or alumni of the university. These shirts are then worn in gyms, schools, and cities across the country. According to Tucker (1992), this increased commercialization, or exposure for the university, is partly responsible for the perception of a university being linked with the perception of its sports programs. Many people only hear about certain universities in the context of their sports teams. Therefore, due to a lack of knowledge of the university itself, these people have only a university's athletic performance to judge the school by. Also, fans emotionally bond with sports teams, and therefore with the university, thanks to all of the exposure that winning teams receive (Duderstadt 2000). After watching a thrilling game in which a certain team competes, an individual is more likely to have fond memories and thoughts about those teams, and therefore those universities.

The arenas in which basketball games are played and the stadiums in which football, soccer, and lacrosse games are played also allow universities to host events that they otherwise would not have been able to accommodate. Community event planners can cooperate with the university to hold events on campus and therefore local companies may be interested in advertising in the venue.

Universities with competitive sports programs will be relatively well-known across the country due to all of the exposure the schools receive by having their respective sports teams compete on national television, such as CBS, ESPN, and ESPN2 for college football and basketball, and ESPNU for less heralded sports such as lacrosse and soccer. When the relationship between "expert ratings" of universities and athletic success rates of major football and basketball sports programs were tested, the results indicated that there is a positive relationship between athletic success and perceived university prestige. Furthermore, results between expert ratings of universities and non-expert ratings were highly correlated, which indicates that the opinions of the experts are good indications of typical prestige perceptions (Quattrone 2008).

Athletics as another form of advertising:

Most intercollegiate athletic programs in the United States do not profit from their athletic programs. In fact, only 15 major NCAA athletics programs are profitable (Budig 2007). However, Division I athletics paves a path for commercialization for the university which has a competitive team. According to Kezar (2004), thanks to mass media and journalism, a sports program is one of the most visible aspects of a university. That being said, money "lost" to athletics is not simply lost. It is another form of advertising, and therefore can be viewed as money spent on advertising instead of strictly as a loss. The exposure that a university gets through athletics is different than paid TV or magazine advertisements. Even if the school does not earn more money in revenue than it loses to total costs for its sports program, it does not necessarily mean that the school is really "losing" anything.

Having a successful athletics program will assist in bolstering the “brand” of an institution, and will therefore improve its quality of applicants. Lawlor (1998) explains that knowledgeable prospective students are more likely to choose which college to attend based on the “brand” of that institution than any other single variable. Brand identity for a university is “the essence of how you would like alumni, prospective students, legislators, and the public to perceive your institution” (Lawlor 1998). It can then be said that a successful sports team improves the general feeling toward a university by alumni, prospective students, legislators, and the public.

As a public school, Binghamton University is starting at a disadvantage. Schools that receive private funding are rated as being more prestigious and parents believe that their children will learn more and have more academic opportunities at private institutions (Suitor, Powers & Brown 2004). A Division I athletic program has helped other public schools such as UCLA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Michigan, and countless others achieve national acclaim. Binghamton University, through its continuing efforts to produce a competitive Division I sports program, will have the opportunity to join these public schools in their national acclaim. Through athletics, B.U. has the opportunity to build a reputation that is as positive as private schools that share the same rigorous academic opportunities and rigor as B.U.

II. BEST PRACTICES

Binghamton native Mrs. Sarita Karandikar has had an integral role in promoting and organizing music and arts events in the Binghamton area. She has had a lot of success in connecting the community with students who hold a common interest in the performances which she organizes. Even in the absence of free food, her events draw many students and community members.

The lack of food at Mrs. Karandikar’s events, she says, ensures that only truly dedicated fans come to her events. However, this insight could be used in a different light for the sake of this paper. To successfully connect alumni, students, and community members, the goal should be to draw as many people as possible to sporting events and not just those who are fans of the team. Enticing people with free food and the prospect of connecting with alumni, community members, and other students should prove to be an effective way of encouraging people to come to these events. Mrs. Karandikar has a passion for organizing her events, and it shows. This is important to note, since excitement should start from the top with the organizers and the attendees will feed off of this positive energy.

Binghamton University’s men’s basketball team had its most successful season ever in 2008-09. The team was the America East regular season and tournament champions. They garnered a lot of support from alumni, community members, and students alike. The student support was epitomized by the tents set up outside the Events Center box office more than 48 hours before tickets even went on sale for the America East championship game, which was held at the Events Center on campus at Binghamton. The tents were temporarily the homes of dedicated B.U. students who wanted to show their support for the team as well as ensure that they would get tickets to the game, which were sure to sell out. At the America East Conference Tournament, which was held roughly 140 miles away at SUNY Albany, there was a great turnout of both B.U. alumni and students. In Greensboro, North Carolina, which is approximately 575 miles from campus, there were a few hundred students and alumni present for the Bearcats’ first ever NCAA men’s basketball tournament appearance. Alumni came from

all over the east coast to see the game and support the team. Clearly, the level of interest from all three of the aforementioned groups is strong. How does the University use this positive energy and interest by letting sports serve as a vehicle to connect students, alumni, and community members?

Binghamton University already has many good programs in place that assist in developing interest and support for the sports program among alumni, students, and community members. For the first time ever, the university decided to tie athletics into homecoming this past year according to Michael Kalinich, the Assistant Athletic Director, Corporate Partnerships at Binghamton University. Many alumni visit campus during homecoming to show their support for the school and to reminisce about their college days with old friends who they do not get to see very often. There is a lot of alumni support for the athletics program at Binghamton.

Adding athletics to this past year's homecoming turned out to be a very smart and successful move by the University. For the first time in school history, a soccer match was played during homecoming and alumni and students were highly encouraged to participate in the festivities. There were also fireworks launched after the game for some added entertainment. According to Kalinich, the 2008 homecoming match was the first sell out in Binghamton men's soccer history. The school also received a lot of positive feedback for its efforts to tie in sports with homecoming weekend, since sports serve as a great form of entertainment for the masses.

The athletics department at Binghamton also makes sure to host gatherings in cities in which a lot of B.U. alumni live. For example, during the 2008-09 season, the men's basketball team played at Stony Brook and Rutgers, both of which are in areas that are heavily populated with B.U. alumni. The school rented out restaurants and hosted events which served as a common meeting place for the alumni in the area. Kalinich said that there was a great turnout at both events. There was already interest and support for the team, and the school took advantage of using the basketball game as a vehicle to reconnect B.U. supporters.

There are also a few examples of B.U. connecting community members to the university. In April, the school collaborated with the city of Binghamton to host a celebration for the recent success of the basketball team and wrestler Josh Patterson, who became B.U.'s first Division I All-American wrestler. According to the Press & Sun Bulletin, officials from Broome County and the city of Binghamton honored the men's basketball team by presenting to them a plaque, and proclamations were read to the men's basketball team and Patterson by Binghamton mayor Matt Ryan and Broome County Legislature Chairman Dan Reynolds.

Jason Siegel, the school's Senior Associate Director of Athletics, Kevin Broadus, the head men's basketball coach, and Kalinich all recognize the benefits of a successful sports program and uniting the university with the community. "The more we can close the gap, the better off it's going to be for everybody," he explained. "[There will be] more donations, more sponsorships, etcetera." Siegel graduated from Binghamton in 1990 and was the school's basketball announcer back when games were held in the West Gym before the Events Center was built. He has been able to see firsthand the school's transformation from a small Division III program to a recently thriving Division I program. "I wasn't usually announcing to too many people," he said, touching on the new possibilities that a successful Division I sports program offers. "The community wasn't involved. There weren't any advertisements sold. There weren't any corporations bringing groups. There weren't any Boys and Girls Clubs bringing groups. We have all that now." Broadus reflected on his days as an assistant coach at Georgetown, one of the nation's elite basketball schools. "We had just two media outlets when I got there," he said.

"When I left [after reaching the Final Four], it was the whole country" (Wolin 2009). After George Mason, a school which has an athletics program comparable to Binghamton's, reached the Final Four in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, it saw unbelievable increases in applications (22%), percent of out-of-state freshman (8%), and average SAT scores in the freshman class (25 points) as well as in fundraising and game attendance (AP).

The Binghamton Mets and the Binghamton Senators, which are minor league baseball and hockey teams, also understand the importance and benefits of getting students involved with their clubs. Both teams have given extra incentives for B.U. students to attend their events by offering free or discounted tickets and special prizes. For example, the Binghamton Mets designated a certain night "Binghamton University Student Association Night" earlier this month. This encourages students to get off campus and familiarize themselves with some of what the community has to offer them.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a great number of possibilities for growth in the realm of improving awareness of the university's sports teams and using athletics to help improve communication and relationships between Binghamton University students, faculty, alumni, and community members of the southern tier region. The aforementioned groups are filled with supporters of B.U. athletics. Many sporting events, especially basketball games, draw a very well proportioned crowd with many students, community members, alumni, and faculty in attendance. The athletics program can therefore be tapped as a resource for social networking. I spoke with numerous community members in the past week who agreed that it would be nice to get to know the students, and I know that students would like to be more involved with the community.

The resources are already available to hold social networking events such as mixers before basketball games. The Events Center has numerous rooms and areas that are large enough and have the capabilities of hosting such events. Since many community members, students, and faculty already attend the school's basketball games, they would only need to arrive roughly forty-five before game time to participate in a pre-game mixer. Involving alumni would also be feasible for the more important games, for which they would be willing to make the trip to Binghamton if they live out of the area.

Another idea which does not involve the school's Division I sports program, but uses sports as a vehicle to unite the community and students, is to start a recreational basketball league for the local children that would be coached (and possibly refereed) by students. Coaching would be on a volunteer basis, so league participants should be able to enjoy this service at a relatively low cost. There are a lot of students who would like the opportunity to coach kids, and it would be a great way to introduce the university students to the children and parents in the area.

The popular Jailhouse restaurant in Tioga County, in which guests dine in a jail cell in an old jailhouse, helped inspire this next idea. Somebody who has not yet had the "experience" of going to jail may be interested in dining in jail because it puts them in a kind of "fantasy world." They are apparently intrigued by the idea of spending some time in similar conditions to a criminal.

Perhaps Binghamton University's basketball team can host scrimmages in which they would team with community members, alumni, or both. For example, there could be three teams, each of which would have three varsity team members and five non-varsity team

members. The two teams would then scrimmage against each other. Non-varsity team members, many of whom have not played on a high school varsity team, let alone Division I basketball team, would be placed in a "fantasy world," since they would have wanted to play Division I basketball but were not able to. Former competitive basketball players may also relish this opportunity. Such an event could also serve as a great way to advertise the basketball team and fans and alumni personally involved and more familiar with the team. The more familiar they are, the more they will get involved with the team and university, according to the research outlined in earlier sections of this paper.

The amount of media coverage that the North Carolina Tar Heels received for letting president Obama practice with them earlier this year also served as inspiration for this idea. The story was on national news for over a week. There are also summer camps for wealthy older men in which they go off to a "fantasy camp" and play on a team coached by a well known college coach, such as Duke's Mike Krzyzewski.

My old elementary school had a charity basketball game in which the teachers in the district competed against the New York Giants in a game of basketball. Perhaps there could be an event with Binghamton's coaches competing against area teachers. This would surely be very entertaining for the school children and familiarize them with the sports program at the University.

Other sports teams, such as the university's lacrosse and soccer teams, or the Binghamton Mets or Senators, could host a practice in which local high school athletes get to watch and participate in a few of the drills with the team. This would be very beneficial to the development of local athletes and would definitely help develop interest in the local varsity athletes for the college varsity athletes. Since many high school varsity athletes are looked up to by their peers in the community, their support for the university's teams could translate to more support for the teams by more high school and middle school kids in the area.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is currently a wonderful opportunity to use athletics as a vehicle to connect the university with alumni and the community. Due to a lack of communication and social networking, there is not as much involvement by alumni and community members with Binghamton University as there could be. Binghamton University students would be interested in getting involved with the community, though they are not sure where to start. These could be fixed by an improvement in communication and social networking between the community and university through Binghamton University's Division I sports program. Division I athletics has the ability to connect students, community members, and alumni the way few things can. There are also other benefits to having a competitive Division I sports program, such as increased publicity and an improvement of a university's reputation through association with its athletics teams.

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