

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE PROGRAM EVALUATION: BENEFACTOR IMPACTS AND ADMINISTRATOR PERCEPTIONS

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Study Purpose

Professional sport organizations serve both public and private interests. While private interests are facilitated through direct stakeholder partnerships, public interests represent the prevailing social concerns connected to the organizations social responsibility (SR). However, empirical research on sport organization SR has been limited due to a lack of outcome assessments and impact studies – particularly regarding how SR has influenced the intended beneficiaries. This is a problematic gap in the literature since many SR programs are supported through stakeholder investments and corporate partnerships. To assuage this concern, and build on the existing body of SR scholarship, the purpose of this study was to evaluate a socially responsible program by a professional soccer club in the United Kingdom. Fulham Football Club Foundation created the ‘My Future Goal’, funded through Barclays ‘Spaces for Sports’ initiative, with the intent to bolster employability and life skills for London area youth. This program evaluation was performed to better understand organizational synergies and benefactor impacts for delivering SR at the community-level.

Literature Review

According to Walker, Heere, and Kim (2013), the phrase ‘social impact’ has assumed a cursory role in the SR conversation. This has mainly been the case due to sport organizations either shying away from evaluating their programs or simply not making the results of their evaluations public. One underpinning element of SR is the implied social contract between society and the organization. Therefore, organizations that support SR should be more inclined to fulfill this perceived obligation (Porter & Kramer, 2006). We argue that many organizations have not evaluated their brand of SR because the process could demonstrate ineffectiveness, which might lead to negative publicity for the firm. Additionally, many organizations may lack the resources and acumen needed to conduct a proper evaluation. Yet, as SR programming advances, the role of program evaluation should assume a central role for both marketing ROI and intangible social ‘paybacks’. What’s more, many SR initiatives in sport are funded through private grants and sponsorships that demand evaluation for future engagement and fiduciary support.

Method

‘My Future Goal’ employability program is being delivered by Fulham FC Foundation and funded through Barclays ‘Spaces for Sports’ initiative. The two

organizations announced a three-year partnership to provide a football and sport employability development program for London youth. Participants are invited to take part in cohort groups that range from 25-35 participants each over a 10-week training period. The program seeks to bolster employability and life skills, personal motivation, self-confidence, and assist participants with gaining accreditations for employment and education (Fulham FCF, 2013). The researchers were contracted by both organizations to conduct a holistic evolution of the program.

To conduct a program evaluation, researchers have an assortment of methodological tools at their disposal. The most popular approach is quasi-experiment where participants answer questions before and after the program. While this approach should demonstrate aggregate effectiveness, the quantitative approach (in isolation) limits the researcher’s ability to understand all the reasons for success; or conversely, failure. Based on this, researchers typically opt for a mixed-method approach where questionnaire data are combined with qualitative methods. While the quantitative aspect is currently underway, this presentation focuses solely on the qualitative element to reveal the nuanced reactions and perceptions of program benefactors and administrators.

Results and Discussion

At the time of this submission, data from one participant cohort (N=32) and program N=6 administrators had been collected. However, by the time of the presentation, data from three additional groups will be analyzed. As a result, it is still early to draw any definitive conclusions about overall programmatic impacts. That said, however, our initial evaluation suggests that the employability program is having a positive psychological impact on participants. For some, it has been an eye-opening event, for others, it has been an inspirational start to perhaps a new career and life. For example, when asked about the most important outcome of the program, all the participants agreed they were more focused on a career and their self-esteem and confidence were enhanced. In addition, many commented that by working in a group setting, their communication and personal skills were greatly enhanced. Finally, the program administrators were all quite positive as well. However, many expressed concerns that after the 10-week program, participant tracking was critical to know whether graduates pursued job and/or education opportunities.

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