

The Gatekeepers of Information: The Role of Sports Information Professionals

in the Dynamic World of Collegiate Athletics

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## Abstract

The work of Sports Information professionals is crucial to the success of getting the word out related to collegiate athletics. The work of Sports Information professionals is also full of difficult elements that challenge even the most dedicated of practitioners. From limited full-time openings and a strong reliance on student labor, to struggles for respect among peers and non-traditional hours, the Sports Information profession is full of challenges in the best of times. Throw in a global pandemic that shuts down the world of collegiate athletics, and a difficult task becomes even more challenging. This paper focuses on the key components that must be mastered in order for someone to survive in the competitive, and underappreciated career of Sports Information. Through an exploration of the field of Sports Information this paper rolls back the curtain and provides a clear picture of the behind the scenes world that many fans of collegiate athletics may not even know exists.

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## Introduction

The world of collegiate athletics is constantly evolving. Thanks to television channels like ESPN, and websites like Bleacher Report, there are numerous platforms that allow fans around the clock access to sports news. While the methods of delivering the information of sports has changed through the years from word of mouth, to newspapers and radio, to the internet and twitter, one thing has remained the same. Regardless of the method of delivering the information, Sports Information Directors, or SIDs, were back then, and still are at the center of this storm of information related to collegiate athletics. Sports Information professionals act as the official gatekeepers ensuring that the correct information related to sports is disseminated to various stakeholders, both internally and externally. During the period of time involving the COVID-19 virus, when the world of collegiate athletics entered an indefinite timeout, the need for clear and trusted information coming from the schools to the fans became even more critical. Sports Information professionals must do their jobs in an ethical and legal manner that follows the rules of the institutions that they work for, while also adhering to the standards set forth by other governing bodies. There are a lot of moving parts behind the scenes when it comes to performing the information gathering and disseminating features of a collegiate athletic department. Sports Information professionals are a crucial element of the behind the scenes efforts to promote a collegiate athletics department in the best light possible, while also serving as gatekeepers of information to ensure that the right information is released.

### Legal Issues

Although there are many aspects that go into the job of a Sports Information professional, perhaps the element that has the most impact, and per capita value, relative to other parts of the discipline, for both practitioners and the institutions they serve, is that of understanding legal issues. That is to say that Sports Information Directors, and the entire Sports Information Office staff they manage, need to be sure that their day to day operations are conducted in compliance of school, conference, state, and national laws and regulations at all times. Additionally, for college athletics, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and College Sports Information Directors Association (CoSida) provide guidance related to acceptable practices within the field of Sports Information pertaining to ethics and compliance. Legal and ethical guidelines, and restrictions, help to form the goalposts for what information can and cannot be released to the media, as well as the manner in which it should be released.

Of course, while knowing the laws of the land is crucial for Sports Information practitioners, knowing how to respond when athletes, coaches, or other athletic department employees break the laws of the land is an ever-growing area for Sports Information Offices to address. Sports Information professionals do not need to be lawyers in order to perform their jobs. However, as the gatekeepers of information for the athletic programs, they need to have a working knowledge of all legal issues that govern their craft. Knowledge includes knowing where to look for answers for additional items that may come along in the ever-dynamic world of Sports Information. As part of maintaining these high ethical standards, Sports Information professionals need to ensure that since they are usually the ones first encountered by the media when an issue arises, they are always giving information, versus spreading misinformation. Even if the misinformation is given in error, the ramifications can be huge. After all, people read the

big headlines on the front page and rarely will read the retraction buried on page 24 if the message delivered was incorrect the first time.

In their article, *Playing Outside the Lines; Contemporary Legal Issues in College Sports*, authors Joy Gaston Gayles and Joy Blanchard identified the three most urgent legal issues facing college athletic departments as, 1) negligence claims, 2) anti-trust, pay for play, and right to publicity, and 3) sexual assault (Gayles & Blanchard 2018). One need only scan the sports sections of most newspapers, or websites like ESPN or Bleacher Report, to see stories touching on each of those subjects. College athletes, and institutions of higher education, often struggle to find a balance on the tight rope of generating revenue through the effort of the athletes and maintaining the principles of the institution. Athletic programs also must juggle the legal boundaries of higher education, along with the rights of the individual athletes. Although it may seem like the number of college athletes having legal issues is a new concept, Sports Information Offices, and other parts of the collegiate sports community, have been dealing with legal issues within the three categories Gayles & Blanchard identified long before social media and ESPN gave 24 hour a day access to everything good and bad about collegiate athletics. In fact, the very term “student athlete” that has come to describe the men and women who compete in collegiate athletics was coined by the NCAA in 1953 as the result of a lawsuit filed by a student who was seeking payment in return for his athletic services (McCormick & McCormick, 2006). Over 60 years later, college athletes and colleges and universities have still not reached consensus on payment for athletes beyond scholarships; despite the masses amounts of money brought in year after year through collegiate athletics.

Another issue that Sports Information professionals face in terms of the rights of athletes relates to use of the athlete’s likeness in promotional materials. While it is traditional for media

guides and other materials generated within the Sports Information Office to include pictures of the athletes, issues beyond media guides make the question of image usage a hot topic. Ongoing questions exist related to schools and conferences profiting from an athlete's likeness through video game covers and other non-editorial uses. It is not unreasonable to surmise that a time could come when an athlete will need to be compensated before their picture is placed on the cover of a media guide or game program. Gayles & Blanchard noted that the 2015 court case, *O'Bannon v. NCAA*, upheld the status quo in terms of restricting student athlete pay for use of their likeness when an appellate court overturned an earlier ruling that would have set up a payment fund for student athletes (Gayles & Blanchard 2018). Time will tell if the *O'Bannon v. NCAA* ruling continues to be the law of the land, or if a new court case will change the way business is done in college sports as a whole. Any change in how an athlete's likeness can be used in editorial product, like official social media channels, game programs, media guides, etc. would greatly impact how Sports Information professionals can promote the student athletes and the teams at the institutions they serve.

Aside from trying to balance the needs and rights of athletes with those of the institution of higher learning, colleges have also faced legal issues from their employees that have gathered national attention, such as Michigan State University being fined \$4.5 million dollars for the activities of former employee Larry Nassar. Schools can also find themselves subject to civil lawsuits from students who have been the victim of sexual assault or other crimes committed against them by student athletes. Gayles & Blanchard found in their research that nearly a third of all sexual assaults reported on college campuses are alleged to have been committed by student athletes (Gayles & Blanchard 2018). That is both a sobering and challenging statistic for Sports Information professionals to deal with as they try to perform their gatekeeping duties.

Even though the primary job of a Sports Information professional is to provide information to the local and national media related to the college athletic programs in an ethical manner, they do not do so in a vacuum. Sports Information professionals can try to shape the narrative to focus on the positive through on the on the field stories of the teams and athletes they cover, however, issues like sexual assault charges filed against athletes are fair game for members of the media to ask about. One always has the right to say “no comment” to a question asked by the media, however, Sports Information professionals must remain open and transparent in both times of great success as well as times of great challenge while respecting the legal rights of the student athlete and their employer.

Although the issue of history as it relates to Sports Information will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this paper, there is value for all employees of a collegiate athletic department to know the background and history for the legal issues they face. Sports Information professionals need to be able to provide background in some cases to a media and public who may not have the same level of knowledge on the subject. An example of a Sports Information professional needing to know background on an item would be as it relates to the release of an athlete’s medical information such as an on-field injury. Privacy laws limit what can be released related to injuries and a Sports Information professional needs to have the background on legal items like Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) to answer when a reporter asks why they cannot get more information. Additionally, knowing the rationale behind where certain rules and regulations came from can help practitioners grasp the importance of adherence to those guidelines.

With the world of collegiate athletics currently experiencing a timeout due to the Covid-19, enterprising Sports Information professionals should use this time to ensure that they are up

to speed on the legal issues they are likely to encounter once the games begin again. These are uncharted waters in many ways with stadiums and arenas across the world empty. Although no one knows exactly when, the fans and the athletes will return at some point, and when they do, there will likely be new challenges, including the potential of new court cases trying to extend an athlete's eligibility after a lost season. Whatever new legal issues arrive there is value in knowing that Sports Information professionals will be there to open the lines of communication while adhering to applicable legal standards once more as the world of collegiate sports exits an extended timeout and plays ball once more.



### History and Culture

Next to knowing about the legality of what can and cannot be done, knowing the history and culture of sports, which includes what was done, along with why it was done, is one of the most important values for Sports Information professionals. The legal aspects of Sports Information practices and procedures provide the rigid framework of what is done according to the law and ethical principles. The historical and cultural elements of Collegiate Sports help to bring in an emotional component to the practice of Sports Information. The emotional component is accomplished by providing guidance related to the institutional traditions that can make attending a football game at one school an entirely different experience from that at another school. Or to put it another way, the legal elements provide the walls, and the culture and history provide the furnishings. Related to those furnishings, at some schools, Like Texas A&M University, the fans stand for the entire game. At other schools, like the University of Central Florida (UCF), fans jump up and down after every touchdown. UCF's post touchdown tradition has led to their stadium gaining the nickname "The Bounce House" based on the trampoline

effect caused by student and alumni alike leaping in unison. Some schools stand, some schools bounce, and some schools need more cowbell.

Although many school traditions can be similar from school to school, and program to program, there are also some unique exceptions. Mississippi State University is the only Division I football program where cowbells are allowed inside the stadium. Mississippi State University has cowbells despite the fact that artificial noise makers are banned at all other Division 1 schools (Interis and Taylor, 2017). Mississippi State University's tradition comes with the caveat that there are restrictions to when fans can let their bovine bells ring. The governing Southeastern Conference (SEC) can fine the school for violations, and in the most extreme case, the SEC can even decide to ban the tradition, as it has previously done (Interis and Taylor, 2017). Many schools may consider their traditions to be invaluable, and just part of who they are as students and alumni of their school. Matthew G. Interis and Naomi J. Taylor sought to place a monetary value on Mississippi State University's unique tradition in college sports. Through a survey of fans, Interis and Taylor concluded that even with the constant threat of fines, and the potential for the SEC to ban the tradition, the net benefits of ringing cowbells at Mississippi State University football games is about \$1 million per home game (Interis and Taylor, 2017).

Mississippi State University is unique in having cowbells, and having data to place a monetary value on their tradition. Sports Information Directors need a working knowledge of all of the traditions at their school, and the history behind them. School traditions, even those traditions where a monetary value has not been established, are crucial to the identity of a school. Sports Information professionals use knowledge of the history and culture of their institutions to help shape the narrative. Shaping a narrative based on knowledge of history is especially important when it comes to individual and team athletic records. Almost every media guide

published by a Sports Information Office includes an exhaustive list of records for that particular sport. Although the term all-time record holder is often used, history has shown time and time again that almost every record can be broken. Sports Information professionals need to know when an athlete at the school they work for is about to break a record so that an information campaign can be implemented.

As part of this plan, the Sports Information team needs to ensure that the coach and athlete breaking the record are made available to the media for interviews in the event that the record falls. Attention to knowing when a record is about to fall honors both the history of the previous record holder as well as the athlete on pace to set a new record. It also allows Sports Information professionals to perform their main function of providing information about the programs they cover. Knowledge of records and their importance to an athletic program serves as another crucial example of how the history and tradition of college sports is built one generation, and one team at a time. Seasons do not occur in a vacuum and the best Sports Information professionals know how to look at the big picture and historical and cultural context of every decision they make.

Aside from keeping track of records, Sports Information professionals can help familiarize new members of the media assigned to cover the school with the traditions that they can expect to see and the reasoning behind them. If Sports Information professionals do not know the correct information to provide, then they are not serving the schools that employ them. They are also not serving the media that relies on them. Most importantly Sports Information professionals who do not have the correct information are not serving the fans who support the events. Traditions can only be maintained if they are taught to new generations. Of course, traditions can sometimes have a shelf life as they face changes in cultural norms, or can even pit

fans who see a mascot or tradition as a harmless part of their sports narrative, against a population who finds said mascot and/or traditions offensive.

Perhaps one of the greatest battles between fans wanting to maintain a status quo, and a people group wanting a change in tradition, involves the use of Native American nicknames in collegiate and professional sports. Through the years many Native American groups have voiced concern related to the way they are depicted in collegiate and professional sports (Grose, 2011). In some cases, opposition to not changing a team name can be just as strong as the forces wanting a name change. Due in part to the traditions and the fan equity associated with a certain team nickname, schools can sometimes be forced to choose between alienating a fanbase, or going against current societal norms. Either option when faced with decisions related to moving away from imagery and nicknames considered offensive by certain populations has the potential of offending a segment of the population. Although the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) certainly has the power to dictate what schools can and cannot be called, they instead left it up to the schools to figure out on their own with certain caveats. Instead of forcing schools to change their names, the NCAA addressed the issue enacting a policy where teams with Native American nicknames, imagery or mascots can still participate in championship tournaments as long as they do not wear uniforms with Native American nicknames or imagery on them (Grose, 2011). Although the decision is left up to individual school, the NCAA policy bans teams who do not change their nickname, mascot, and imagery from hosting championships (Grose, 2011). As is the case with most things, there are exceptions to the rule. Florida State University, which is known as the Seminoles, was allowed to continue to use their mascot, imagery and nickname after being granted permission from the Florida Seminole tribe (Grose, 2011).

There will likely continue to be challenges that arise in terms of the culture and history of Collegiate Athletic Departments. Although Sports Information professionals will not be in charge of making all of the decisions related to culture changes, they will be in charge of communicating those decisions. In communicating elements of athletics Sports Information professionals should always remember to value both the history and culture of their institutions. Sports Information professionals must also keep in mind that history and culture can change. Changes can come from outside forces such as changes in cultural norms, or inside forces such as an athlete poised to break a long-standing record. Regardless of the forces at play, be they internally driven, or externally driven, Sports Information professionals stand ready as the gatekeepers of information. As long as they are armed with a background in the history and traditions of their schools, the information they give will continue to be sound. Delivery of sound information ensures that traditions and history continue to be taught with or without the sound of a cowbell, or the sensation of weightlessness inside a bouncing stadium.

### Ethical Issues

The value of learning and understanding ethics in the field of Sports Information is another critical trait for all practitioners in the field to possess. The topic of legal issues in Sports Information was addressed in previous sections. It should be noted that there is a difference between doing things because that is what the law says, and doing things because it is the right thing to do. Sports Information professionals are guided by both a professional Code of Ethics, set by the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA), as well as their own moral compass that shows them the difference between right and wrong. The world of collegiate athletics is full of examples where a strong moral compass is needed to steer the ship through

troubled waters. Of course, that compass does not always get utilized, and true north can sometimes get lost.

Numerous schools have been embroiled in cheating scandals due to student athletes, or athletic department employees, not employing ethical standards. One such area that made the headlines in 2019 involved parents being accused of bribing coaches at the University of Southern California (USC) to get their kids enrolled as athletes. Although the courts are still working to decipher the particular issues in the case, several coaches at USC lost their jobs as a result of demonstrating lapses in ethical judgment. The situation at USC is just one of many examples that could be cited related to college athletic departments demonstrating poor ethical practices. The issue at USC, and other schools, reinforces the idea that Sports Information professionals should conduct themselves in an ethical manner in everything they do, even if at times they are forced to issue press releases and other communications outlining unethical behavior that occurred at their institutions.

While Sports Information professionals often have to deal with external ethical issues, there are internal issues that arise within the office as well that can test their moral compass. One area where ethical issues arise within the field of Sports Information is with the treatment of staff. In a 2001 study related to the composition of Sports Information Offices, Robin Hardin and Steven McClung discovered that most Sports Information Offices relied on student labor in order to keep the office running smoothly (Hardin, & McClung, 2002). Hardin, & McClung discovered that while each Sports Information Office had about four full time employees, the breakdown of the student labor among the schools surveyed equated to an average of 6.31 undergraduate students and 1.65 graduate students per Sports Information Office (Hardin, & McClung, 2002). Ethical Sports Information professionals will not just see interns as free, or reduced cost labor,

but will instead see them as vital members of the team. Knowing that the students are an invaluable part of the day to day operations means that Sports Information professionals need to act ethically and nurture the interns by giving them the opportunity to learn all of the skills that will be required when they venture out into the job market post-graduation.

In addition to treating the staff in an ethical manner, Sports Information professionals must also treat the information they gather in an ethical manner. In particular, as the ones chronicling school records a Sports Information professional needs to ensure that the statistics captured properly reflect what transpired on the field. With minimal oversight in certain sports, the word of the Sports Information professional is final when it comes to the official statistics captured. By ensuring that the same ethical qualities being asked of the athletes extend to the Sports Information professionals as well, the right statistics will be recorded. Failure to maintain these ethical standards could lead to a scenario where all records were questioned and would delegitimize the profession. Hardin, & McClung discovered that 98.8 percent of the people they surveyed were members of CoSIDA, and would therefore be subject to the CoSIDA Code of Ethics; as well as any penalties for violating it (Hardin, & McClung, 2002).

Another area where ethics can come into play involves the challenges faced by Sports Information professionals related to how members of the media are treated. The CoSIDA Code of Ethics includes wording against openly cheering for a team within a working press box. Journalists have similar codes of ethics to prevent the appearance of favoritism when they are working in an official capacity. Edward M. Kian, et al. noted that sports reporters fail to fulfill their watchdog roles as unbiased journalists when they engage in “homer” journalism by openly cheering for a team, or becoming too close to athletes (Kian et al, 2014). By the same token, Sports Information professionals who become too close to a reporter, or provide insider

information to one media outlet, that is not made available to all outlets covering their school, engage in unethical behavior by not treating everyone equally. That is not to say that friendships cannot develop between members of the media and Sports Information professionals. However, within their official capacities both journalists and Sports Information professionals need to act in an ethical manner that provides the facts equally and presents an unbiased account of the action.

Even as the methods of the delivery of content continue to evolve, media outlets and Sports Information professionals will continue to need each other when it comes to getting the word out. Some college conferences like the Southeastern Conference (SEC) have partnered with ESPN to create their own networks as a way to shape how their member schools are covered. Most colleges will not have the resources to create their own 24 hour a day cable network to control their narrative. Therefore, an ethical relationship with both local and national media is required to ensure that the message travels from the gatekeepers of information in the Sports Information Offices to the public.

#### Event and Faculty Management

In addition to needing to conduct their work in an ethical manner, Sports Information professionals must also be able to show flexibility, as well as knowledge, in the discipline of event and facility management. Unlike most professions where the worksite is the same from day to day, Sports Information professionals conduct their work in a variety of locations, and in all types of facilities. Although most Sports Information professionals will spend a portion of their work day inside an office setting, many will also find their worksite located in a press box, or at a table courtside at various athletic facilities. These facilities can be located at the school that the Sports Information professional is based at, or at other universities.

Multiple worksite locations may seem like a daunting task, however, there are ways to ensure that every work location is a successful work location. Preparation ahead of each event is critical in order to be successful at the remote location. Good preparation includes ensuring that everything needed to perform the tasks is brought to the arena, field, or stadium well ahead of the start of the event. In many cases, a return to the office to pick up forgotten items is not an option. Therefore, having everything up front is critical to success. Sports Information professionals should also be able to predict the needs of the media attending the event in order to ensure that their coverage, and in turn the exposure of the school, goes well.

The logistics of each facility will vary from sport to sport. Covering games on a soccer pitch will vary greatly from covering events at a baseball stadium. Sports Information professionals will need to oversee their staff to ensure that the gameday operations run smoothly. Depending on the sport being covered the staff required to cover it could be one or two employees, or 10 or more. Regardless of the staff size at the event, Sports Information professionals need to make sure that all of their tasks are handled in a timely and efficient manner. Responsibilities are not just limited to the action on the court, or the field of play. In some instances, Sports Information professionals are also responsible for coordinating pregame meals for members of the media who are covering the event. Aside from managing the gameday and dietary experience, Sports Information professionals may be required at times to provide crisis communication following the injury of a fan at a school event.

Fan injuries have become a common occurrence inside many athletic facilities. One sport that has been hit particularly hard by fan injuries in recent years is baseball. As a result of foul balls injuring fans, Major League Baseball (MLB) has extended the netting along the first and third base lines in most of their ballparks to mitigate the potential of balls and flying bats injuring

fans in the stands. The extension of netting is a relatively new addition to ballparks. The issue of awareness related to potential injury to fans, and liability for those injuries is not a new topic.

For years, many ballparks and arenas have posted signs within the facilities warning fans of the potential for foul balls, or pucks, to enter the stands. Additionally, tickets for sporting events have included a disclaimer and limitation of liability clause on them as a means to limit potential legal exposure. Mohit Khare noted that under the primary assumption of risk, sports organizations are protected, in most cases, from legal action if risks, like getting hit with a foul ball or a puck “are common knowledge or open and obvious to a reasonable person” (Khare, 2010). Although facility owners are protected from many of the legal aspects of fan injury, the optics of injured fans being broadcast in high definition on screens across the world have led to enhanced steps being taken to protect fans attending events. By installing netting that removes some of the views of fans, and also provides a barrier between fans and players, a clear line in the sand was drawn stating that fan safety was more important than any potential fan discomfort.

Most Sports Information professionals will never have to issue a statement related to fan injury; however, it is an area that they should be aware of. If called to action they should be prepared to show compassion for the injured fan, and not resort to using inflammatory statements, like “the sign clearly said there was a chance they could get hit.” Instead, statements of concerns and genuine heartfelt wishes will go further in soothing a public that will forever have video of someone getting carted out of the stadium after getting hit.

The rise in luxury boxes in collegiate athletics is creating unique tiers in how fans experience an athletic contest. Differences in fan experience is something that Sports Information professionals will need to be aware of. In some cases, their workspaces could be relocated in order to make room for premium seating for fans. Although it does not happen often,

moving of press boxes does occur. Minute Maid Park, the home of the Houston Astros, moved their press box from the lower bowl behind home plate to an upper bowl. The old press box site was subsequently converted into premium seating. The trend in maximizing the areas that can generate premium prices is happening more frequently. Stephen L. Shapiro, et al. noted a 147% increase in the number of luxury suites in the four major professional sports leagues in America over a 20-year timeframe (Shapiro, et al. 2012). That trend is likely to follow in the collegiate athletic ranks as more and more stadiums and facilities are renovated, or replaced entirely to account for a growing desire to turn them into money making platforms. As consumer tastes changes, the facilities and events within college athletics will need to change along with them to ensure that the fan experience is maximized along with maximizing all revenue streams.

Related to construction of new facilities, Sports Information professionals can be a crucial element of the promotion of facilities from the ceremonial dirt turning photos, to opening day. Construction of any new facility at a college is a huge undertaking, and is never done inside of a vacuum. From preconstruction to first game, there are myriad opportunities for Sports Information professionals to provide promotion and updates to build excitement of the new facility. Sports Information professionals will work hand in hand with the marketing staff and other key stakeholders to ensure that a consistent message is transmitted related to the new facilities. Sports Information professionals can also be tasked with arranging tours of the facilities to members of the media as another way to build excitement.

Whether they are utilizing existing facilities, or promoting the pending arrival of new facilities Sports Information professionals work in a dynamic environment in multiple locations as they work at the gate of information to ensure that the communication channels for all athletic events go smoothly. At times the dynamic work can also involve ensuring that the local beat

reporter always has their Diet Coke and pizza waiting for them when they arrive. Little details in managing a game can go a long way in ensuring that the narrative of the school gets out to the public.

### Management and Sports Delivery Systems

Facility management is certainly a crucial element within the field of collegiate sports. The facilities hold little value though without sound management and a strong sports delivery system that allows those facilities to be full of teams and fans. To paraphrase a line from the movie *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they will only come if there is a strong infrastructure in place. Four crucial elements of that infrastructure that managers in collegiate athletics must include in any sports delivery system are, the culture, the employees, the games, and the fans. The culture refers to the traditions at the school and the game day experience. As noted previously, culture can involve standing for an entire game, bouncing up and down after every score, or ringing cowbells. All employees working the game need to be fan centric and ensure that to the best of their abilities the fan experience is a pleasant one. The experience a fan has at an event can vary greatly depending on whether a team is winning or losing. The overall enjoyment that a fan receives from attending a game should not be hampered by items that could be controlled by the employees.

As part of their role within the sports delivery model, Sports Information professionals have both a challenge, and an opportunity, to work in multiple facilities. They also face a challenge of being respected. J. Sean McCleneghan concluded that although Sports Information professionals are hardworking and committed, they lack the respect of a person working in a managerial role (McCleneghan, 1995). With different surroundings from site to site, and a constant battle to be respected, it is imperative that the game day experience for their staffs be

consistent from one facility to the next. Just as a football field length does not vary from venue to venue, the need to deliver consistent and accurate information about the games taking place also remains constant regardless of the surroundings. There are no dress rehearsals in sports. Once the game begins it is up to everyone involved to do their part within the sports delivery system. David Shilbury concluded that in sports, “service delivery is time dependent and requires spectators and players to be present during production and consumption” (Shilbury, 2000). On April 29, 2015, the Baltimore Orioles and the Chicago White Sox tested Shilbury’s conclusions when they played a game at Oriole Park at Camden Yards with no fans in attendance. The stands were empty in response to riots and unrest that were occurring in Baltimore at the time. Five years after the first game in MLB history was played without fans in the stands, there were once again discussions related to holding games without fans. Instead of a localized response to unrest in one community, the discussion in the Spring of 2020 centered on all sports communities as a response to a global pandemic brought about by a virus.

The COVID-19 outbreak tested managers and the sports delivery systems in a way that many sports had never experienced. Social distancing requirements, as well as limits on crowd size, led to the cancelations of the XFL, NBA, NHL and almost all other sports leagues. On April 10, 2020 the XFL announced it had suspended operations indefinitely and laid off all league employees. The Olympic Summer Games were delayed by at least a year. All NCAA spring sports tournaments, including the Men’s and Women’s Basketball Tournaments were cancelled. Major League Baseball ended Spring Training early, and delayed the start of the season. The leagues that continued to hold competitions did so without fans in attendance as they tried to balance social responsibility with the public’s appetite for live sports. Specific sports leagues

have lost all or parts of seasons to strikes, but no event in recorded history has impacted all leagues at the same time for as long as COVID-19 did.

Without a playbook for how to stop and restart all live sports across the globe, sports professionals at all levels were forced to think on the fly, while also ensuring compliance with governmental guidelines. Most sports leagues were placed in an extended timeout; however, Indy Car and NASCAR found a new sports delivery system to give their fans some live racing. Through the use of computer simulated races using the real drivers of the sport, Indy Car and NASCAR sought to return to as normal of a sports experience as possible. The simulated races had much of the look and feel of the real thing as drivers competed from their homes. After seeing the success of Indy Car and NASCAR, other leagues looked at ways to use video games and other electronic platforms to create new sports content as a way to keep sports fans engaged. MLB even floated the idea of basing all of their teams at their Spring Training sites in Florida and Arizona as a method of offering televised games in empty ballparks.

Sports Information professionals need to have the flexibility to think outside the box in terms of the use of communication channels. When the action on the field is interrupted social media can be used to bridge the gap between athlete and fan. A stoppage in the competition on the field does not mean a stoppage in providing information about the athletes at a school. There are still many stories to tell. One of those stories involves the potential for some senior athletes to continue their playing careers. The NCAA has granted an additional year of eligibility to players who saw their seasons end early. Sports Information professionals can keep fan bases engaged by putting the athletes front and center through the communication channels at their disposal.

Seeking to control the narrative through vertical integration is not a trait exclusive to Sports Information professionals, nor is it a new phenomenon. In 2000, David Stotlar noted that

“vertical integration appears to be running rampant in the sport industry” (Stotlar, 2000). In reaching that conclusion, Stotlar was referring to companies like Disney, the parent company of ESPN and ABC, as well as News Corp., the parent company of Fox, controlling the majority of sports broadcasting. Since the time of Stotlar’s assessment, the sports media landscape has become even more compressed with Disney becoming the parent company of Fox. Content providers like ESPN, ABC and Fox are becoming content creators to further centralize their message. One reason cited for the growing number of college football bowls is the fact that ESPN owns many of the bowl games it broadcasts. Control of content allows “the worldwide leader in sports” to profit from all aspects of the game. More bowl games mean more revenue streams for ESPN.

Vertical integration also gives Sports Information professionals fewer people to deal with when disseminating information. Depending on the relationship, fewer contacts can either be a good thing or a bad thing. As noted previously, the Southeastern Conference (SEC), is one of several college conferences who have partnered with ESPN to form their own networks as another method of ensuring that the narrative, as well as the profits, are controlled in house. Grouping of content creators and content distributors falls under what Shilbury refers to as a sports cluster where the driving force is almost always economic (Shilbury, 2000).

Despite attempts to control the narrative and the communication channels, even the best sports delivery system can fall victim to unforeseen circumstances, as evidenced by the response to COVID-19. When an entire system goes down it can be difficult to bring it back. It is also hard to maintain a sense of normalcy during extended outages. NASCAR and Indy Car showed one response pertaining to creating new content to keep fans engaged. Other sports struggled to mimic their sports delivery systems and relied on airing content from previous years. Both are

valid responses in uncertain times. Both responses also show the importance of having someone shaping the narrative and providing a clear calming voice and messaging. Sports Information professionals can step in and fill that void as they stand ready at the gate of information.

### Financial Management

The best Sports Delivery System is useless if it is not funded and managed in a way that it can succeed. In 2019 and 2020 two separate football leagues, the Alliance of American Football (AAF) and the XFL, ceased operations due in part to a lack of financial resources. The failures of the AAF and XFL occurred despite growing fan bases and network coverage of their games. The AAF and XFL joined the United States Football League (USFL), the Arena Football League (AFL), the World League of American Football (WLAF), and others that have tried and failed to start a professional football league from the ground up. In baseball, the Senior Professional Baseball Association (SPBA) lasted a season and a half before folding. Each of these examples of a failed league demonstrates that although there is a lot of money to be made in sports, establishing a new sports league to grab a piece of that money is extremely difficult.

Financial management in sports involves budgeting, forecasting, and planning. Financial managers must be aware of current trends in order to stay competitive. Internal and external constraints, such as budget and size of the fan base, must also be taken into account when making financial decisions. A knowledge of all expenses is also a critical component of financial management. Expenses can include venue costs, insurance, equipment costs, travel, accommodations, marketing, promotions and staff salaries. In addition to knowing the expenses, financial managers in sports need to know about revenue opportunities in order to have a complete picture of the financial status of the organization.

Jeffrey L. Stinson and Dennis R. Howard cited NCAA research which concluded that in 2005 the average Division I-A athletics program competed in 16 sports with revenues of \$29,400,000 and expenses of \$27,200,000, the average Division I-AA program competed in 15 sports with revenues of \$7,200,000, and expenses of \$7,500,000, and the average Division I-AAA institution competed in 14 sports with revenues of \$6,200,000 and expenses of \$6,500,000 (Stinson and Howard 2008).

Part of the expenditures involved in collegiate athletics at all levels resides in the Sports Information Office. Sports Information professionals generate numerous periodicals throughout the year. While many products are distributed electronically, there are still costs associated with printing items that need to be managed through the department budget. The ability to properly budget the cost for each media guide, or other publication, is crucial. Sports Information Offices that spend all of their money on football media guides, and leave nothing in the budget for tennis, or golf guides, are not managing the financial aspects of the job. Part of responsible financial management for Sports Information professionals involves eliminating unnecessary expenditures and maintaining rainy day funds to cover unexpected expenses.

The level of financial awareness for Sports Information professionals is often limited to maintaining their own departmental budgets. However, they should also be aware of the big picture in terms of the overall budgets for the athletic departments that they work for. One of the largest capital expenditures that a college athletic department can undertake is construction of new facilities. The U.S. Sports Academy discovered that new facilities can cost between \$30 million to \$300 million (U.S. Sports Academy 2008). These costs can be divided between public and private sources to offset the amount of money a college system will pay, but they cannot be completely eliminated. Public funding sources include cash donations, contributions, naming

rights, concessionaire rights, sponsorships, lease agreements, luxury and preferred seating, parking fees, advertising, and team shop revenues.

Constructing new facilities, and managing all of the financial elements that go into them, can be expensive. Conversely, not building facilities can be expensive as well. According to the U.S. Sports Academy, ticket sales and television contracts account for 80%-85% of team revenue with sky boxes, parking concessions and club seats accounting for the remaining 15%-20% (U.S. Sports Academy 2008). More sky boxes and luxury suites equate to more revenue, which in turn allows the teams to have more money. For college sports, more money can be used for facility upkeep and also used to enhance intangibles that help with recruiting athletes.

Financial Management is tied to facility construction in many ways. One of the biggest ways is that construction of facilities should not begin until all funding has been secured. New facilities can be a great ambassador in recruiting students and fans. However, an unfinished facility acts as a beacon of fiscal irresponsibility. Having an unfinished arena on campus would be a nightmare for the marketing and Sports Information teams to deal with in terms of explaining the unfinished facility to the media and community.

Grasping financial management does not guarantee long term success for a sports organization. There will always be external factors that impact even the best laid plans. The near total shutdown of all sports during the COVID-19 epidemic proved that fact. A lack of financial management can speed up the demise of a sports organization. Organizations that hemorrhage cash, or have no idea how they will make their payroll or other expenses will not last.

The failure of the XFL can likely be attributed at least partially to COVID-19 however, failures are not just limited to new start up leagues and global pandemics. Even established teams

in established leagues run into financial hardships. Since 1970, at least nine professional sports teams have been forced to file bankruptcy due to financial issues. The Pittsburgh Penguins have filed bankruptcy twice since 1970. Many of the teams emerged post-bankruptcy with new owners, however, some did not. The teams that have filed bankruptcy include, the 1970 Seattle Pilots, the 1975 Pittsburgh Penguins, the 1978 Cleveland Barons, the 1993 Baltimore Orioles, the 1995 Los Angeles Kings, the 1998 Pittsburgh Penguins, the 2003 Ottawa Senators, the 2003 Buffalo Sabres, the 2009 Phoenix Coyotes, and the 2010 Texas Rangers.

Unlike professional teams and leagues, athletic programs at colleges and universities are unlikely to face bankruptcy. That does not mean that they are immune to funding shortfalls. Athletic departments constantly face the prospect of decreases in funding, and the potential of being forced to move to a lower level of competition. The University of New Orleans was faced with that decision after Hurricane Katrina damaged many of the school's facilities in 2005, leading to enrollment decreasing by over 7,000 students over a three-year period (NCAA, 2015). As a result of these factors, the University of New Orleans announced in 2009 that the athletic program would move from Division I to Division III in order to have lower operating costs which included no longer offering athletic scholarships (NCAA, 2015).

Other schools have cut individual teams as a way to stay afloat during periods of reduced funding. In 2015 the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) ended their football program in a cost savings measure. Two years later, the football team was reinstated after the UAB Football Foundation raised an estimated \$27 million. Some schools are heavily funded and generate substantial sums of money each year through donations, broadcast rights, student fees and other revenue streams. Other schools are not as lucky when it comes to funding. The story of the

University of New Orleans demonstrates that there is a large divide between the haves and the have nots in collegiate athletics.

Liz Wanless and Jeffrey L. Stinson researched financial contributions for athletic departments over a five-year period and found that the schools in Power Five conferences received 23% of their athletic contributions through fundraising efforts (Wanless, & Stinson 2020). Wanless and Stinson also concluded that revenue within athletic departments is not increasing at a high enough pace to keep up with the expenses at most universities (Wanless, & Stinson 2020). The widening gap between revenue and expenses is creating a situation where athletic departments are relying more on financial support from tuition reallocations and student fees. Failure to bridge the expenses versus revenue gap could lead to additional college athletic programs making tough choices to eliminate teams, move to a lower level of competition, or eliminate athletic programs altogether.

Although Sports Information professionals comprise a small portion of an overall budget for an athletic department, they are part of the overall financial management equation. Sports Information professionals share the same responsibility as stewards of funds as any other department. They must utilize those funds to promote the athletic programs at their school to the best of their ability, and within the budgetary guidelines. Some Sports Information professionals will have large budgets, while others will need to get creative and make the most out of less. Regardless of the size of the budget, the financial resources entrusted to the department must be spent in an ethical and professional manner.

### Marketing Management

Financial management and marketing management go hand in hand when it comes to the job of a Sports Information professional. By being fiscally responsible with budgets, Sports Information professionals can ensure that their marketing efforts generate the most bang for the buck. Depending on the way that a school's marketing efforts are divided, Sports Information professionals may work independently, or together with the overall marketing department of the university, as well as the marketing department for the athletic department. Regardless of the level of day to day interaction between marketing departments, a concise marketing strategy should be established between all marketing arms within a university to ensure that competing messages are not sent out.

G. Clayton Stoldt, et al. noted that while there are numerous tasks involved in the practice of Sports Information, the overall goal of Sports Information professionals is, "to enhance the athletics program's image among key constituents such as the mass media, the fans, the alumni, and other university personnel" (Stoldt, et al. 2001). Athletics departments and athletes have been called the front porches of a university since, just like a front porch on a house, the athletics department is usually the first thing that many people see at a university (Suggs, 2000). Sports Information professionals ensure that everything that is visible on that porch is communicated in a manner that fits the standards and practices of the rest of the house. In the past, Sports Information professionals needed to rely almost entirely on local and national media outlets to disseminate the information from the porch to the fans. The invention of the internet and social media changed that dynamic and allowed marketing efforts to be more closely controlled at the source, or from the porch swing.

With the rise of social media platforms and college run websites, Sports Information professionals now have access to marketing platforms that their predecessors did not have. Instead of having to wait for the evening television news to cover a score, or for the next day's newspaper to print a box score, information is now able to be released in real time, and consumed in multiple platforms day and night. One quick and inexpensive marketing platform that can allow Sports Information professionals to engage directly with the fans is Twitter. Chad Witkemper, et al, looked into the motivations and constraints of Sport Twitter Consumption (STC) to determine whether fans using Twitter to connect with and follow a sport-related entity could positively impact marketing efforts (Witkemper, et al. 2012). By measuring the four factors of Information Motivation, Pass-Time Motivation, Fanship Motivation and Entertainment Motivation Witkemper et, al discovered that Twitter was a valid marketing resource for sports entities to use to get their message directly to the fans (Witkemper, et al. 2012). Sports Information professionals can send myriad types of tweets from lineups for baseball games, to videos of an outstanding catch or dunk. Fan engagement sent directly from the source allows the Sports Information professional to control both the narrative and the cost of broadcasting the message.

Twitter is just one of the tools that can be used by Sports Information professionals to communicate the message of their university directly to the fans. Another way that Sports Information professionals can cut out the middle man and communicate directly with fans is through an electronic front porch, or official athletics department website. Sports Information professional can populate these sites with game summaries, schedules, rosters, photos and anything else that they can think of to promote the athletes and teams at the school. The postings need to follow the ethical standards and regulations set forth by university, conference and

NCAA policy. School controlled websites offer many more opportunities to control the narrative than the days of sending a release on a women's soccer game to a newspaper and hoping they decide to print it. Athletics department websites can also be used as revenue generating streams. Any advertising on the sites would again need to fall within university, conference and NCAA guidelines. Online advertising offers a potential means to expand marketing budgets when handled correctly. The athletics websites can also be used as an internal advertising method to promote upcoming games; including rivalry games.

The ability to capitalize on a rivalry game can be quite lucrative for Athletics Departments. Cody T. Havard, et al. surveyed a group of sports fans and discovered that they were "more likely to consume the favorite football team (i.e., through attendance at live games, watching the team on television, purchasing team merchandise, or consuming the favorite team using online mediums) when playing a rival team than when playing a non-rival team" (Havard, et al. 2014). Sports Information professionals need to be aware of who the rivals are for their school. Knowledge of rivals can be used to develop a marketing strategy that builds up anticipation for the game. Anticipation creates a need for fans to attend by tying into a fear of missing out. Once the fans are in attendance for the rivalry game, marketing efforts need to be geared to promoting other events that the fans should attend. Through an integrated effort of building demand for attendance and promoting to a captive audience the marketing efforts can be fully capitalized on.

As previously discussed, the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) went two seasons without a football team. A football program is the biggest draw for most college athletic programs. The loss of that level of exposure can be difficult for a school to adjust to; even if the team was a financial burden to the university (Hutchinson, et al. 2016). The UAB football team

was ultimately restored after new funding sources were procured. Within the time period before and during the football team's absence a new marketing strategy was required. The strategy needed to include what life would look like without the football team, and then be modified to promote the return of the football team. UAB utilized market segmentation to create segment specific promotional messages and a consistent brand message about UAB Athletics for all groups (Hutchinson, et al. 2016).

Sports Information professionals must also look at their marketing efforts in segments. The needs of employees, students, fans, alumni, and mass media must all be considered when formulating a marketing strategy. As new social media platforms are developed Sports Information professionals will need to ensure that they are up to speed. The ability to adjust to all of the ways that information, and the overall marketing message can be communicated will remain crucial skillsets for Sports Information professionals. The days of faxing game reports and box scores to the local newspaper are long gone. Now more than ever Sports Information professionals have the power to shape the narrative and communicate directly with stakeholders.

### Management Principles

Marketing management is just one of several skills that Sport Information professionals need to be proficient in. Another integral skill needed for Sports Information professionals to master is management principles. The five basic functions of management include, planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling. Whether it is managing their time, their tasks, or their staff, it is crucial that strong principles guide the decisions Sports Information professionals make. J. Sean McCleneghan interviewed 110 Sports Information Directors in 1995 and discovered that on average the breakdown of their tasks per week was, 55 percent administrative duties, 15 percent hands-on duties for a particular sport, 10 percent writing press releases, 10

percent working with media and 10 percent special projects (McCleneghan, 1995). Some of the methods for performing those tasks have likely changed in the 25 years since the survey was taken as fax machines have given way to email, but the overall breakdown of the time spent in each area should be about the same.

One of the Sports Information Directors who was part of McClenaghan's study, Rod Commons, noted that burnout was prevalent in the field due to Sports Information Directors enjoying their jobs to the point that they, "devote more time to it than is healthy" (McCleneghan, 1995). Commons went on to say that, "Athletics, especially at the major college level, has taken more out of its employees than it should, knowing that the employees will give as much as they can, as long as they can because they don't view it as a job, but rather as a hobby that produces income" (McCleneghan, 1995). Time management, and the ability to delegate tasks, are critical steps for Sports Information professionals to master in order to avoid burnout. With increasing flexibility in the workforce moving from organizational direction to more employee driven direction, how one manages their time and tasks is even more critical now than ever (Aeon & Aguinis, 2017).

Delegation of tasks can go a long way towards eliminating burnout in the office. Strong Sports Information professionals will realize that they cannot do everything by themselves. As a result, they must hire and train staff that can perform tasks that spread out the workload. As noted previously, Sports Information Offices rely heavily on undergraduate and graduate student labor as a means to supplement a small full-time office staff. When delegating tasks to student workers Sports Information Directors need to be aware of the limitations that the students have in terms of skill levels, as well as time limitations.

Managing stakeholder demands and expectations is another critical aspect of the gatekeeping feature Sports Information professionals perform. By cultivating strong relationships with both internal and external stakeholders the information can flow in and out of the office in a smooth and organized fashion. Unfortunately, some stakeholders can be harder to deal with than others. Another respondent in the McCleneghan survey noted that the biggest obstacle he faced in performing his management functions came from some of the people within the athletics department itself. Kevin McKinney, noted that his biggest concern with managing the day to day tasks within his office was dealing with, “coaches who believe they are bigger than the game” (McCleneghan, 1995). Strained relationships with members of the media can also create areas of concerns among Sports Information professionals.

Risk management is another critical element for Sports Information professionals to be familiar with. In some schools the Sports Information Director acts as the Assistant Athletics Director for Communications and Marketing. In this dual role, it is imperative that all elements associated with a particular athletic event, including game day promotions, are handled with as little risk as possible. Matthew T. Brown and Andrew Kreutzer cited several cases where promotions were managed poorly and placed the team in charge of the promotion in legal crosshairs (Brown and Kreutzer, 2002). Brown and Kreutzer concluded that marketers need to realize the limitations and pitfalls of promotion, specifically those exposing spectators to risks (Brown and Kreutzer, 2002). Some of the cases cited by Brown and Kreutzer which both resulted in litigation include a baseball mascot’s t-shirt cannon causing permanent eye damage to a fan, and a basketball mascot dragging a fan onto the court to take part in a promotion against their will (Brown and Kreutzer, 2002).

Sports Information Directors who also serve as the Marketing Director for an Athletics Department need to have a risk management plan in place to address areas like mascot behavior when projectiles like a t-shirt cannon are being used. The plan also needs to clearly outline fan interaction and consent requirements. The risk management plan should be considered a living document that is updated as new situations arise, and to incorporate any lessons learned. Lessons learned should include promotions that go well, in addition to promotions where things did not go well. The risk mitigation plan needs to include a risk versus reward approach. Risk and potential reward must be considered before any promotion is implemented inside a stadium or arena. Additionally, employees participating in the promotion need to be trained to ensure that all possible risk mitigation steps are taken to protect spectators and to limit the exposure of the organization to potential legal issues resulting from a promotion gone wrong.

As the complexity of the field of Sports Information continues to grow in terms of the various channels and communication platforms that are available to utilize, it will become increasingly important to manage each of those areas effectively. As noted previously, many of the larger colleges and universities are moving more of their promotional efforts in house as a method to control the narrative. Part of controlling the narrative is managing the way that it is delivered both internally and externally. Although the titles and specific duties may differ somewhat from school to school, the main job of a Sports Information Director will continue to be to do all they can behind the curtain to ensure that the product delivered, whether that be a news release, or a free t-shirt shot from an air cannon, is delivered with precision and attention to detail.

### Statistical Principles

Management principles are an important element of the job of a Sports Information Professional. Another important trait to master involves the field of statistical principles. The world of sports is full of statistics. Avid fans and professionals alike can often quote a certain player's statistics with the precision of a doctor reading an electrocardiogram (EKG). Runs Batted In (RBI), Batting Average (BA), and Earned Run Average (ERA) are just some of the statistics that are tracked in baseball. Basketball tracks statistics in free throw percentage, assists, and shooting percentage to name a few. Baseball and basketball are not alone. Every sport has a lengthy list of statistics that are captured as part of competition.

In collegiate athletics, Sports Information professionals are often on the front lines when it comes to capturing the statistics for their teams. Sports Information professionals use statistics in their jobs in myriad ways from compiling record books in the back of media guides, to tracking current athletes on a game by game basis. As noted previously, some Sports Information Directors serve in the dual role of being the Marketing Director for the athletics Department. In this role they can use statistics to quantify fan engagement, or to track the success of a specific promotion. Statistics can also be used to determine the best nights to schedule a game. In all of these ways, the collection and the dissemination of the statistics must be handled in an ethical manner. The collection of statistics further cements the gatekeeping role of the Sports Information Office and highlights the need to have ethical principles in place related to the collection and dissemination of statistics.

Although statistics have always been a part of sports, in 2002 one professional baseball team found a way to use statistics in a whole new manner. The 2002 Oakland Athletics have been credited with starting the sabermetrics era of baseball. The success of the Oakland Athletics

was the subject of a book, and movie, which were both titled, *Moneyball*. The book and movie detail how General Manager Billy Beane fielded his team based on an analytical, evidence-based approach. Beane's approach looked at a player's ability to perform in certain situations compared with other players. The statistic became known as a player's Wins Above Replacement (WAR). The implication being that the higher a player's WAR, the more likely the team was to win a game with that player in the lineup versus another player.

The approach Beane took in building his roster was born out of necessity. As a smaller market team, with a smaller payroll, the Oakland Athletics had to out think their competition, since they couldn't outspend them. In the years since, other smaller market franchises have embraced the Oakland A's approach as well. The Tampa Bay Rays, have managed to win more games than many other teams by spending smarter. Professional sports teams often invest millions of dollars each year on analytics as they look to find every possible advantage to win more games. B. Jay Coleman at the University of North Florida conducted a survey of 140 analytics journals and discovered "a sizable and growing set of literature related to sports analytics" (Coleman 2012).

The analytical approach goes far beyond selecting the right players. Baseball teams that have invested heavily in the sabermetrics approach are using spray charts to predict where an opposing batter is most likely to hit the ball. Through the use of a shift, players often find themselves positioned right under the ball. Although the use of advanced statistics to gain a competitive edge has its critics, it should be noted that the use of historical data to position players is far more ethical than players on a team banging a trash can to tip a batter of a pitch that is coming in real time. As the sabermetrics approach to the game has gained a major footing in dugouts across the league, Major League Baseball is looking into limiting the types of shifts

teams can use, as well as dictating the number of batters a pitcher must face. The potential steps by Major League Baseball to limit how statistical data is used during a game shows the potential hazards of knowing too much information at the expense of allowing the variability of the game to play out.

In addition to the questions related to the competitive advantage of using statistical trends like sabermetrics, ethical questions are also being raised related to the amount of data being collected on athletes. The potential of creating unfair competitive advantages with teams that invest heavily in analytics, and teams that do not, is another area that is being studied. Dov Greenbaum noted that “big data and predictive analytics” represents a “unfair and unnatural advantage” (Greenbaum, 2018). Greenbaum went on to note that although disallowing all analytics in sports would be unthinkable, there are safeguards that need to be put in place on the way the information is collected to ensure that they do not run afoul of an athlete’s privacy (Greenbaum, 2018). Based on the level of analytics being captured it is likely that teams could discover potential medical issues that a player could be predisposed to. Greenbaum notes that a team could potentially use this information to trade a player, or not sign them to a new contract if their data says that the player is likely to suffer from a certain health condition (Greenbaum, 2018). The issue of who owns the data on a player after they are traded is another issue that needs to be looked at as the use of statistical data continues to grow within the ranks of sports (Greenbaum, 2018).

The quest for a competitive edge through statistical analysis will continue to be at the forefront of athletics at all levels but it needs to be done in an ethical manner. Nancy Reid and David R. Cox noted that there needs to be “a healthy interplay” between the foundations of statistical analysis and application (Reid, and Cox, 2015). The issues of what to do with

potentially damaging or personal information collected on athletes will need to continue to be looked at as part of that application. Legal and ethical issues will also continue to intertwine with the statistical principles, as will governing athletic bodies trying to limit the competitive advantage that teams can use through analytics.

Statistics have been around as long as there have been sports. The rise in technology, along with what new statistics can be captured, will continue to create unique challenges and opportunities for Sports Information professionals, coaches, athletes and all other interested entities. Sports Information professionals need to be aware of how statistics are collected and ensure that any statistics that they release to the media, or other interested parties, are done in an ethical manner and fall within the guidelines set by their school, their conference and any other controlling entities.

### Internships

Management principles are crucial to success in the Sports Information profession. Another equally important rung on the Sports Information ladder occurs at the start of one's journey in the field through an internship. As previously noted, most Sports Information Offices rely on an average of 6.31 undergraduate students and 1.65 graduate students to supplement a small staff of around four full-time employees (Hardin, & McClurg, 2002). Many of the full-time staff were once interns themselves, which shows the importance of completing an internship to gain both knowledge and a competitive advantage when it comes to securing full-time employment in the Sports Information field. Hardin, & McClurg noted that the fact that around 75 percent of a Sports Information staff is comprised of student workers is both a blessing and a curse (Hardin, & McClurg, 2002).

With positions for around eight students on average in larger Sports Information offices, a plethora of opportunities exist for students to gain experience in the field through internships. With a built-in reliance on student labor, interns in Sports Information Offices are often performing many of the same duties that the full-time staff is engaged in. Hands-on experience can be an invaluable asset for those students who are wanting to transition into Sports Information work full time after they graduate. Unfortunately, with an average of three interns to every full-time employee, the opportunities to transition from an intern to a full-time staff member can be difficult to find. Hardin, & McClurg discovered that the average Sports Information Director has around 17 years of experience, and has been at their current institution for nearly 12 years, leading to a situation where the turnover rate is small, and there is little opportunity for advancement once a person has entered the profession (Hardin, & McClurg, 2002).

Kenny Klein, of the University of Louisville, summed up the Sports Information job market as, “limited for a number of bright, young prospects because the opportunities for full-time employment directly in our profession are small” (McCleneghan, 1995). Scott Selheimer, of the University of Delaware, described the competition for jobs as “a major problem because institutions are using undergraduate interns and graduate assistants full-time at minimum hourly wages to staff SID offices.” (McCleneghan, 1995). With so much competition for so few jobs, the need to gain internship experience becomes even more important for those who wish to enter the Sports Information field.

Eunice Briet and Miryha Runnerstrom studied the importance of internships and discovered that undergraduate students who participate in an internship experience higher levels of flourishing (Briet and Runnerstrom, 2019). Some of the reasons why students who participate

in internships flourish, compared to their peers who do not partake in an internship, include, the opportunity to improve their professional skills, the ability to explore potential careers while they are still in college, and the ability to practice networking in their respective fields. Internships also allow students to increase their knowledge of their chosen field which gives them an advantage when they are applying for jobs after graduation. Conversely, internships also allow students to discover whether the field is something they want to enter after they graduate, or if another career path should be chosen.

As previously mentioned, the College Sports Information Directors Association (CoSIDA) is the official governing body for Sports Information professionals. The CoSIDA website, [www.cosida.com](http://www.cosida.com), provides a listing of all graduate internship openings at the member schools to facilitate communication between job seekers and member institutions. CoSIDA also provides resources, and reduced cost memberships, for students as another method of getting students involved in the Sports Information field. An annual convention serves as another networking opportunity for potential interns to meet potential employees. The CoSIDA convention was cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19, however, it is likely to return in 2021.

The time commitment for an internship varies from full-time graduate interns, who often receive free or reduced tuition, as well as a stipend, in exchange for their work, to part time undergraduate interns. The number of hours a week that undergraduate interns work varies by season and intuition. Briet and Runnerstrom discovered that undergraduate students who spent more days per week at their internship site experienced more frequent negative feelings (Briet and Runnerstrom, 2019). Digging deeper into the reasoning behind why more days per week equated to unhappier interns revealed that fewer days and longer shifts allowed more opportunities for the student to engage in meaningful work because they have more time to

invest in a particular task (Briet and Runnerstrom, 2019). Regardless of the number of days, or the length of the shift, it is crucial that interns gain as much experience as they can while they are in the office, or at the game, to master the skills that will help them enter the field full time after they graduate. Interns need to view their internships as extended job interviews and constantly assess what is going well, and what is not going well (Sjölin, 2019).

Sports Information Offices cannot function without interns. Most students cannot gain employment in a Sports Information Office after graduation without having first been an intern. The staffing model for most Sports Information Offices creates a symbiotic relationship where interns are needed to address both current and future employment needs. A multigenerational approach results with the constant influx of new interns each year. Sports Information professionals need to embrace the generational differences and seek to learn as much about what communication methods work to reach the younger generations while also relying on the tried and true communication channels. Sports Information interns serve an important role in the gatekeeping function as they work side by side with their full-time counterparts performing the duties of informing stakeholders of what is going on at their schools.

#### Applied Research Methods

In addition to relying on interns to perform work, Sports Information professionals must also rely on applied research methods from time to time. Although research related tasks make up a small fraction of the workload of a Sports Information professional, when they are tasked with research, they need to ensure that they follow established guidelines for data collection. Following standardized research practices allows Sports Information professionals to utilize scientific techniques and practices to generate practical applications as they plot a course for success within their departments.

One area of research that exists in the world of Sports Information involve surveys. Surveys serve as a method to take the temperature of the room related to a specific topic. In regards to Sports Information, one type of survey that can be conducted is polling graduating athletes to gather their impressions of the services provided by the Sports Information Office. Sports Information professionals may also want to take a survey of media outlets that they interact with to see if there are improvements that can be made in the services provided to them. By getting data from various stakeholder groups, Sports Information professionals can use the results of the surveys to make any necessary improvements to the way they conduct their work.

As noted before, Sports Information Directors can serve in the dual role of being in charge of the marketing efforts for the Athletics Department as well. In this capacity a survey can be used to track fan satisfaction for attending events, or track the success of a certain promotional event. A focus group of key stakeholders can also be used to determine what is going well, and what areas are in need of improvement. Norman L. Choate noted in his research that “the essence of an experiment is its feedback: the lessons it teaches” (Choate, 1972). Surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups are quick and inexpensive ways to collect feedback. Although some feedback can be hard to take, it is an important element of improvement. Results that can be evaluated and acted upon are critical to any research endeavor. In the same manner that a coach would not send their team onto the field without a game plan, researchers need to have a plan before setting out on a survey or other data gathering project to ensure that the feedback received can be useful. Choate stated that the plan in applied research is “analogous to theory in pure research and occupies an equally essential position” (Choate, 1972).

As previously discussed, the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) found themselves in a unique position when the university president decided to end the football

program as part of a cost savings measure. Although the program was later restored when new revenue sources were found, a detailed plan was developed for what life without a football team would look like. The plan was not created out of thin air. Instead, the plan was developed using research methods and feedback from key stakeholders. The research for the plan was handled by the Director of Athletics Communication and Marketing at the school. (Hutchinson, et al. 2016). The plan for determining what life after football would look like included dividing the UAB stakeholders into market segments. For the purpose of the research stakeholders were listed as internal (faculty, staff, current students) and external (university donors, athletic department donors, alumni, former student-athletes, potential students, community members, media members) (Hutchinson, et al. 2016). Once the stakeholders were identified, the UAB team utilized a proactive approach of sending a brief questionnaire to each market segment to better understand their preferences for the future of UAB athletics (Hutchinson, et al. 2016).

Sending questionnaires is just one step in the research process. The ability to know what to do with the data once it is collected is another key element that Sports Information professionals must be aware of. One method for handling data inputs involves establishing a goal hierarchy or dominance (Flascher, I., et al. 2006). Understanding the traits of market segments is crucial for Sports Information professionals in their gatekeeping functions. Different groups respond to information in different ways. Through research and understanding of how a particular segment of stakeholders prefers to receive their information, Sports Information professionals can use a variety of delivery systems to ensure that the intended message reaches the audience. Knowing what delivery methods work, and which ones don't, allows Sports Information professionals to focus their limited resources on promotional efforts that deliver the most value at the least cost.

In the example of UAB Football, the university president was faced with the decision of what is best for the overall university, versus what is best for the fans of the football team. The push and pull between academic and athletic priorities are a common theme at many universities. Calvin Nite, et al, identified the need for researchers to dig deeper into “the inefficiencies created by attempting to satiate multiple institutional logics within sport organizations, especially university athletic programs” (Nite, C., et al. 2013). Nite, et al, noted that intercollegiate athletics provide a fitting context for studying the management of the competing logics of the merit of participation in athletics, versus the undermining of the academic integrity of universities by their athletic departments (Nite, C., et al. 2013). As more research is likely to be conducted on the value provided by athletics and athletes on the overall health of institutions of higher learning, there are steps that can be taken in the meantime to show value added through collegiate athletics.

One way that Sports Information professionals are highlighting the value of athletics on the academic side of the university is to heavily promote athletes who excel both on the field of play and in the classroom. An avenue of promoting athletes who excel in the classroom is through the Academic All-America program sponsored by CoSIDA. Each year Sports Information professionals nominate athletes at their schools who are exceling both on the field and in the classroom for All America and All District honors. Nominating athletes for academic honors may seem like a simple step, however, it can be used in future research to show that athletes can excel beyond the field of play when the next round of budget cuts targets one of a school’s athletics programs.

Research is just one of the many tasks that Sports Information professionals may be asked to perform. As with all of the other tasks, research should be done in an ethical manner

that follows guidelines set forth by the university, and any and all governing bodies that the school is a subject to. Although it may seem like a survey conducted at an arena or ballpark is just an afterthought, the value of research and what can come out of the results shows that there is nothing simple about a simple satisfaction survey.

### Personal Reflections

Through researching the state of the field of Sports Information, I was reminded of the old adage the more things change, the more they stay the same. I had the opportunity early in my career to serve as both an intern in a Sports Information Office, as well as a Sports Information Director/Public Information Manager at the collegiate level. Many of the issues I experienced then are issues that are still relevant in the field today. Delivery methods may change with technological advancements, but the need for Sports Information professionals to provide clear and concise messaging remains constant.

Throughout my time in the Sports Information Office, and in all of my jobs before and since, I have sought to live out my faith by treating everyone I encounter with respect. I further show my Christian worldview through the ethical practices and the mannerism I use in completing my daily tasks. It is important for me to always remember that there are no menial tasks. Everything should be looked at as a service to others. While I do not always outwardly announce my faith through my words, there is no mistaking my faith through my interactions with those around me and the manner in which I conduct myself when no one is watching. I am often driven by the words of Romans 12:9 to, "*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*" These principles have guided in the past and will continue to guide me in the future in whatever future direction my career path takes me.

I was one of the lucky ones who made it to the top of a Sports Information department despite the profession having a low turnover rate, and a small window for advancement (Hardin, & McClurg, 2002). Once at the top of the field I experienced many of the same sensations of burnout that Rod Commons described from Sports Information Directors enjoying their jobs to the point that they, “devote more time to it than is healthy because they don’t view it as a job, but rather as a hobby that produces income” (McCleneghan, 1995). The income produced in the field remains low, compared to other fields, leading to a situation where even when someone is not getting burned out by the work itself, they feel the financial burdens associated with a low paying job and increased family obligations.

The inconsistency of the hours required in the field with office hours and night games can also place a strain on relationships and lead to a feeling of burnout among those in the profession. As was the case in my time, Sports Information professionals are still often faced with the choice between continuing in a job they love, or moving on to another field where they can make a living wage. This fork in the road ties back to the limited opportunities for advancement within the field as well as an oversupply of interns entering the field each semester. The competition for the few higher paying jobs in the field will continue to remain intense with many more applicants than jobs. Sports Information will continue to serve an important role in the overall field of college athletics. However, as the 2020 Spring and Summer without sports brought about by COVID-19 showed the field of Sports Information is not immune to outside factors.

Prior to March 2020 it would have been almost unimaginable to think of a world without sports. With league after league cancelling games, the scenario that no one had ever seriously considered became a reality. Sports, the one constant through wars and other national and

international tragedies in the past, went dark in the blink of an eye. Efforts will continue to stage games without fans for a television audience, but it won't be the same. Part of the appeal of sport is the ability to experience it in person. It is hard to imagine an empty college football stadium providing the same level of excitement for a made for TV game as a packed stadium provides. To smell the fresh cut grass. To hear the crack of the ball hitting the back of a catcher's glove. These are things that matter in sports. The aroma and sound of sport is intoxicating and Sports Information professionals have a front row seat to all of the action. For now, that action has come to a halt and interns and full-time staff members alike are left to ask, what happens next?

Sports Information professionals will need to dig deep to find ways to continue to deliver value to their organizations. Part of a value-added approach involves supporting those around them and showing compassion during trying and confusing times. Those employees who are able to adapt and show compassion to those around them are likely to set themselves apart from those workers who use this time to complain and look for others to blame for the situation. By adopting an attitude of everyone is in this together, those most impacted by the global timeout in sport can better weather the storm. It is crucial to keep in mind that the current situation is also only temporary.

Perhaps James Earl Jones' character Terence Mann in the movie *Field of Dreams* said it best when he said "People will come Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and that could be again. Oh...people will come Ray. People will most definitely come."

Yes, baseball and other sports will resume at some point, and people will indeed come. How many people are allowed to come over the next few years based on social distancing remains to be seen. But when they do come to the fields and stadiums of collegiate athletics, there will be hardworking men and women staffing the Sports Information Offices. Sports Information professionals are living their own Field of Dreams as they work to go the distance in a profession they love as they stand guard at the gate of information one season at a time.

### Conclusion

“No attention, no respect, and a PR practitioner in trouble,” those are the words that J. Sean McCleneghan used to describe Sports Information professionals (McCleneghan, 1995). In the years since McCleneghan made that statement, Sports Information professionals are still seeking attention and respect in the ever-growing field of collegiate athletics. Sports Information Offices are at the forefront of crafting and delivering a concise on brand message for the universities they serve, yet they rely mostly on student labor to accomplish this task. Brian Briscoe, assistant athletic director for communications at the University of North Texas, stated that “SID offices are the 'catch-all' for most all needs of the coaches and staff,” despite serving in, “an understaffed and underfunded position” (McCleneghan, 1995).

Most Sports Information professionals work in the background. Making the profession more visible could lead to more respect and more funding in order to accomplish their crucial tasks of acting as gatekeepers of information. Sports Information professionals serving in dual roles of marketing and public relations must balance the needs of promoting an athletic event, with the needs of providing factual copy about the teams and athletes who compete in those events. More research is needed to determine whether this divided attention benefits the university, or if having two separate people handling marketing and information would be better.

The case study of the University of Alabama Birmingham generating a plan for what life after football would look at for the university is just one example of outside the box thinking that Sports Information professionals must consider. The University of New Orleans moved from Division I to Division III as a means to cut costs for the athletics program after funding and enrollment numbers took a severe hit following Hurricane Katrina. The University of Cincinnati announced in April 2020 that it was ending its men's soccer program. Cited as part of the rationale for the elimination of the team was predicted funding issues brought about by the COVID-19 virus.

As the dust settles from the COVID-19 pandemic, more colleges and universities are likely to take a hard look at their entire operations. It is extremely possible that additional Sports Information Directors will be tasked with generating impact studies for the elimination of one or more teams at their school as colleges and universities look at ways to maintain their budgets among a potential decrease in revenue from students and outside sources. If enough schools eliminate sports across the board it is also possible that the number of full-time Sports Information professionals will also decrease. With more applicants than jobs already, any further contraction in the amount of opening for Sports Information professionals could greatly impact the field. This is another area that will need further research as a post COVID-10 strategy emerges.

With all of these challenges, Sports Information professionals will need to continue to perform their tasks in a legal and ethical manner. They will need to use the CoSIDA Code of Ethics, school bylaws, as well as their personal moral compasses to navigate the uncharted waters to come as sports return from the extended timeout period brought about by COVID-19. It is entirely possible that the collegiate sports landscape will never return to the levels that it was

at before the world of sports was shutdown. Whatever the new normal turns out to be, there will be information to gather and release. Just as Sports Information professionals evolved from sending faxes to sending emails to sending tweets, they will adapt to whatever new delivery systems come next.

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## Appendix

What is CoSIDA?

“CoSIDA (College Sports Information Directors of America) was founded in 1957 and is a 3,100+ member national organization comprised of the sports public relations, media relations and communications/information professionals throughout all levels of collegiate athletics in the United States and Canada. The organization, which celebrated its 60th year during the 2016-17 academic year, is the second oldest management association in all of intercollegiate athletics. CoSIDA became an affiliated partner with NACDA (National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics) in December of 2008. CoSIDA's membership first reached the 3,000 mark during the 2013-14 school year and has topped that threshold each year since. Prior to the formation of CoSIDA in the mid-1950s, Sports Information Directors as a group were a part of the American College Public Relations Association. Most SIDs at those ACPRA meetings eventually felt that a separate organization was needed and that led to CoSIDA's formation. There were 102 members at the original meeting/convention in 1957.” (Source: [https://cosida.com/sports/2013/2/6/GEN\\_0206132054.aspx?](https://cosida.com/sports/2013/2/6/GEN_0206132054.aspx?) )

CoSIDA Code of Ethics link [https://cosida.com/sports/2013/2/6/GEN\\_0206132054.aspx?](https://cosida.com/sports/2013/2/6/GEN_0206132054.aspx?)

## Comment Summary

Page 6

1. very good information

Page 7

2. relevant citation. well done

Page 9

3. SIDs are getting it done during this time

Page 50

4. lets hope it never happens