TELLING THE CAMPUS STORY THROUGH ATHLETICS:
HOW TO POSITION ATHLETICS COMMUNICATIONS IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE
Introduction

Ask college and university presidents about their priorities for communication, and they’ll likely say, “To better tell our story to internal stakeholders and external audiences.”

Ask those same presidents whether the institution’s athletics program has a place in that story, and the response invariably is, “Absolutely.” People don’t refer to the athletics program as “the front porch” of the institution just because it sounds catchy – they do so because it’s true. What component of a college or university interacts most with the community? What galvanizes campus constituents and alumni? What shapes public opinion regarding the institution’s reputation?

In all cases, the answer is ATHLETICS. Who contributes most to telling the athletics story, and in turn the college’s or university’s story? The president? The provost? The AD?

Guess again. Thousands of talented, dedicated communications professionals work tirelessly to tell those stories and advocate for their schools. Their titles may differ – from directors of sports information and media relations to athletics communications and external operations – but their mission is the same: to promote and protect the institutional brand by telling the student-athlete story and extolling the value that athletics brings to the campus and community.

That’s not just an athletics mission, but an institutional one that any college or university president would covet as a priority. The following resource explains why our army of athletics communicators is so valuable and how Division II colleges and universities can better structure and equip their staffs to obtain optimal results.
Athletics communications professionals are most commonly known as “sports information directors,” a title born decades ago to describe their function as historian, record-keeper, statistician and media contact. Game results, programs, stats and quotes came from the SID.

Those roles still exist (and are expected to be executed with lightning speed, by the way), but there’s much more to being an athletics communications specialist today than there was 20, 10 or even five years ago.

The reason for that is twofold. First, the “digital information age” has had a profound impact on athletics communicators. From cell phones, iPads and DVRs to Facebook, Twitter and Web streaming, technology has allowed SIDs to be better – but also busier – than ever.

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Second, as access to information expands, the institution’s athletics program becomes an immediate and far-reaching reflection of the university – an effect not lost on presidents, vice presidents and deans. Now more than ever, athletics is in many cases a college’s best promotional tool, which elevates the importance of those who operate it.

That’s good news, as long as the institution structures the athletics communications staff and resources accordingly. Our athletics venues now routinely serve as broadcast studios producing live streaming video and audio. Twitter messages have become the lifeblood of fans who demand up-to-the-minute coverage, whether they’re across campus or across the country.

While the benefits are tangible, so are the challenges. Athletics communications directors at Division II institutions are particularly stretched because the entire sports publicity operation typically falls to one full-time professional who is challenged with everyday responsibilities while keeping up with the latest technological demands.

Not only are athletics communicators telling the story of their schools through traditional and social media, but they are also performing other major duties, including fundraising, marketing, promotions and game management. Staffing in athletics communications should be commensurate with the value these programs bring to the university.”

Kelly Loft, athletics communications director Southwest Minnesota State University

In a survey of more than 150 Division II schools, athletics communications directors are covering an average of 17 varsity sports, with 67 percent sponsoring at least 14 sports and 20 percent sponsoring 20 or more. Of the respondents, about 60 percent work in an office with no more than one full-time assistant. Many have access to student workers, interns and graduate assistants, but those individuals are in constant need of training. And increasingly, schools are expecting athletics communicators to devote attention to junior varsity or intramural programs in addition to the myriad other duties.

These inherent challenges do not reduce demands upon institutions, or expectations from a public that wants information immediately. But they certainly affect athletics communications directors who must devote the time to exploit technology to its fullest while still being expected to fulfill the more traditional SID roles.

In many ways, athletics communications is just as vital as the institution’s other publicity arm (often called college or university relations), but a comparison of staffing and resources might suggest otherwise. Institutions would be well advised to revisit the two functions as more similar than different.

Kelly Loft, athletics communications director Southwest Minnesota State University
What was once a profession that primarily required writing releases, publicizing events and keeping statistical records has expanded to Web design, video and social media. Given the evolution of duties, it’s no wonder that the position is often titled differently now, as well.

A recent survey found that about one-third of respondents were titled athletics communications director or assistant/associate athletics director for communications.

Along with the fancier title comes a more elevated place in the decision-making chain on campus, and rightly so. About three-fourths of those surveyed said they are involved in administrative decisions, and more than 85 percent believe their opinions are taken seriously.

Athletics communicators’ responsibilities also have increased. About one-third of survey respondents perform duties beyond athletics communications, including coaching, fundraising, athletics compliance and facility management.

While that might be construed as positive, the requisite challenge is that staffing and resource allocation in most cases haven’t kept pace with the workload.

Almost 80 percent of survey respondents said they work an average of between 50 and 70 hours per week. Some of the duties fall within the traditional sports information realm, like producing promotional materials and game programs, but more than 60 percent said their duties range from maintaining the athletics website to hiring and managing ancillary personnel for home games.

The website management in and of itself is immense. Because it serves much like a department’s daily newspaper, athletics communications directors must devote several hours a day to keep it fresh, lively and relevant. Three-fourths of survey respondents said their office devotes between six and 20 hours per week on website management alone. And only 29 directors said they have a person devoted solely to maintaining their website.

Social media is another time commitment. Most athletics communications offices use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, with Instagram moving quickly up the scale. To maintain all of those sites, 80 percent of the offices said they are spending up to 10 additional hours per week on social media upkeep. Then there’s video production. More than 80 percent of survey respondents said they are responsible for producing video for the website, and of those individuals, 42 percent said they shoot and edit all the content. Most of this work follows an already long day of staffing contests and coordinating postgame interviews with coaches and student-athletes.

Nearly all survey respondents said they are live-streaming their home basketball games, and more than 70 percent said they’re doing volleyball, as well. Football was more than 50 percent, too, despite the fact that many of the survey respondents were from schools that do not sponsor the sport. Others earning at least a 30 percent response included baseball, softball and soccer, and those percentages can be expected to rise over time.

“Roles and Responsibilities”

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“The core responsibilities of the sports information director from 30 years ago are still the same today; however, athletics departments must recognize and account for all of the additional layers of responsibilities and duties that today’s professional must now handle with the accessibility of technology and the demands of social media.”

Adam Zundell, senior associate commissioner of communications
Mountain East Conference
As the roles, duties and titles of athletics communicators have changed over the years, the purpose of the work has not. Today, as was the case 50 years ago, athletics communicators are passionate about promoting their student-athletes and their teams to the university’s benefit. In that way, athletics communicators are among an institution’s most fervent and loyal advocates.

That’s why athletics communicators are so essential to the institutional mission. If athletics is an integral component of higher education, then athletics communication is an integral component of marketing the university’s mission.

And what better constituent to promote than student-athletes? Student-athletes are some of the best and brightest campus representatives. They are outstanding students and ambitious competitors, and they are genuinely inclined to engage with their communities. What college or university president wouldn’t want such an ambassador?

Athletics communicators have known this for years. In Division II, student-athletes are inherently committed to academic achievement, community outreach and athletics success – three of the core values that are vital to Division II institutions.

Division II athletics communications directors convey to the public how Division II student-athletes are committed to success not only in the classroom, but also in the community and in competition. That not only provides a valuable marketing tool, but it also enhances the student-athletes’ experiences by promoting their successes in all areas.

Valuing the Student-Athlete Story

“Student-athletes are often among the best and brightest in the entire student body. Telling their stories helps promote our institutions to an array of local, regional and national audiences.”

Michael MacEachern, assistant director of athletics for sports communications
Young Harris College
Telling the student-athlete story and giving student-athletes a voice is even more critical now that Division II has implemented its brand enhancement initiative featuring the “Make It Yours” moniker. Athletics communicators play a critical role in promoting what the student-athletes are “making theirs.”

- It’s making graduation a priority.
- It’s about earning scholarship dollars for your athletic ability and competing for national championships.
- It’s making athletics participation truly part of the college experience rather than just one aspect of it.
- It’s making lifelong friends at a campus whose size affords a more intimate setting.
- It’s the university president seeing students on campus and being able to call them by name and ask how things are going.
- It’s making the academic experience more personal.
- It’s about professors, coaches and staff caring for you as a student.
- It’s about an experience in which you can be an active participant.
- It’s about a campus that is tight-knit enough to respond to individual student needs.
- It’s about having coaches who help athletes develop their resumes as much as their athletics skills.
- It’s about a custom-fit approach to athletics and education rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

The athletics version of “Make It Yours” is similar to what any good admissions officer would use to attract students in general. Again, athletics communicators play just as big a role in student recruitment as anyone on campus.

“Athletics communicators help student-athletes make their Division II experience their own by shining the spotlight on their achievements in competition, in the classroom and in the community.”

Ben Greenberg, assistant athletics director, athletics communications Florida Southern College
Staffing for Success

The most significant challenge facing athletics communications directors in NCAA Division II is adequate staffing. Most athletics communications directors already work excessive hours just to do the job’s minimum requirements – media contacts, website maintenance, statistics, social media, etc. Proper staffing provides the opportunity to tell more than just the story of last night’s game – it’s a chance to tell the story of how athletics changes lives.

Factors to consider when staffing an athletics communications department:

**PERSONNEL**

Based on established industry standards in NCAA Division II, schools with more than 13 sports should consider having more than one person in the athletics communications department. To support the director, athletics communications personnel should be postgraduates in the form of full-time assistants or graduate assistants.

**ROLE WITHIN THE ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT**

The athletics communications director should be considered as part of senior leadership within the athletics department. This individual should be involved in general athletics department meetings and strategic planning.

**ROLE WITHIN THE INSTITUTION**

The athletics communications director should be a member of the institution’s communications team. Student-athletes constitute between 20 and 40 percent of the student bodies at most Division II schools. Athletics communications directors promote the university to potential students just as much as the institution’s communications team does. As such, athletics communications directors should be considered members of that team. This relationship helps to foster collaboration and to maximize resources at an institution.

**COMMUNICATIONS FOCUSED**

The role of the athletics communications director should be focused primarily on strategic communications. Statistical management and oversight, as well as game operations and other duties, may fall within the athletics communications director’s purview, but those areas should not be considered the primary responsibility. A network of volunteers/students should be developed to help assist in statistical and game management.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

An athletics department should set aside funds for regular (at least once every three years) professional development and workshops for athletics communications professionals. Conference and institutional funding from the NCAA should be allocated to assist in these efforts. As faculty and staff are expected to keep up with the times to accommodate an evolving student body, so, too, should athletics communicators be up to speed with what they need to promote a valuable university asset.

**TECHNOLOGY AVAILABILITY**

An institution should provide the athletics communications director with the necessary technological tools both in the office and remotely. Laptops, tablets, computer software and wireless cards allow athletics communicators to successfully complete tasks inside or outside the office.
Resources

NCAA
- NCAA.org
- NCAA.com
- Division II Membership Directory

SOCIAL
- NCAA Division II Facebook
  www.facebook.com/NCAADivisionII
- NCAA Division II Twitter
  twitter.com/NCAADII
  @NCAADII
  #NCAAD2
  #MakeItYours
- NCAA Division II Instagram
  @NCAADII
  NCAAD2
  #MakeItYours
- NCAA
  @InsidetheNCAA
- NCAA Division II YouTube
  www.youtube.com/ncaadivisionii

ONLINE DOCUMENTS
- Division II Strategic Plan
- Division II Facts and Figures
- Division II community engagement resources
- Benefits of Division II membership brochures

COSIDA RESOURCES
- CoSIDA.com
  www.cosida.com
- CoSIDA Twitter
  CoSIDAnews
  twitter.com/cosidanews
- CoSIDA listserv

ONLINE
- Public Relations Society of America
  www.prsa.org (@PRSAtactics)
- Ragan Communications
  www.ragan.com (@MarkRaganCEO)
- Institute for Public Relations
  www.instituteforpr.org
- International Association of Business Communicators
  www.iabc.com
- International Public Relations Association
  www.ipra.org
- Mashable
  mashable.com (@mashable)
- LinkedIn Groups (CoSIDA, PRSA, PR and Communications Professionals, and Sports Information and Statistics)

OTHER
- ECAC-SIDA
  www.ecac-sida.org
- AP Style Guide
  www.apstylebook.com (@APStylebook)

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