

NCAA Athletic Department Sustainability Practices Survey Report

THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH was to gain insight into the sustainability strategies, practices and perspectives within Athletic Departments at NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) universities (formerly known as Division 1A). The survey was conducted from April 10 to April 23, 2009 with the 119 FBS universities as part of a graduate course I took at Harvard.

Participation was exceptional: 97 out of 119 FBS universities (81.5%) answered the survey.

As of May 1st, 2009, more than 620 American university Presidents, representing nearly one third of U.S student population, have signed a pledge to develop an institutional-wide action plan for becoming climate neutral. Nearly three out of four universities report that campus-wide sustainability initiatives are a “very high” or “high” priority. The Athletic Departments at these same FBS schools are, to a degree, lagging behind with less than half reporting that sustainability initiatives are a “very high” or “high” priority.

According to the survey, only 10% of FBS athletic departments have developed a strategic Sustainability Plan with short- and long-term goals. Less than 10% of the surveyed athletic departments are

currently measuring or planning to measure the athletic department’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, an essential step in prioritizing GHG reduction strategies and evaluating the progress of a sustainability plan. While 80% of athletic departments have implemented “moderate” or “extensive” recycling initiatives, less than 5% are measuring recycle rates and setting recycle rate goals for all operations of facilities and events. Encouragingly, over 15% of the athletic departments are now actively considering the development of a strategic Sustainability Plan, 13% are planning to measure recycling rates and set goals, and more than 75% say that the emphasis on environmental programs is increasing.

University athletic departments face unique sustainability challenges which are often not fully addressed in campus-wide sustainability plans. The overall environmental impact of sport facilities and sporting events, particularly the greenhouse gas emissions associated with team and fan travel, and food and vendor supplies, is largely not being quantified. Fan travel alone is a potentially significant GHG contributor. Over 37 million fans attended NCAA FBS football games in 2007. Attendance at 2007 NCAA Division I basketball games (325 schools - men’s and



>> Top: UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, courtesy of Jason DePaep, CSFM.

>> Bottom: THICK CUT SOD from Graff's Turf Farms, Ft. Morgan, CO.

>> Background image: RUSS CHANDLER STADIUM at Georgia Tech, won the 2008 STMA College Baseball Field of the Year Award.

women's combined) exceeded 32 million. On average, FBS universities support over 20 intercollegiate sports per school; the overall environmental impact of NCAA sports programs is not being measured and is therefore unknown.

Along with unique sustainability challenges, athletic departments have unique sustainability opportunities. Visionary universities are recognizing that by developing a comprehensive sustainability program in the athletic department, they can leverage the

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strong brand power, visibility and influence of their intercollegiate sports programs, differentiate their schools, and make meaningful environmental improvements. Athletic departments can greatly benefit from collaborative sustainability initiatives with student-

athletes, teams and the increasingly environmentally-aware student body. Eco-efficiency cost savings are only part of the return-on-investment calculation. Importantly, new revenue opportunities exist through specific fundraising/development for athletic department sustainability initiatives, corporate sponsorship of green programs and green advertising.

Professional sports teams

For a previous graduate-level research project, I conducted a similar sustainability survey among executives from North American professional sports teams (Major League Baseball, National Football League, National Basketball Association and National Hockey League). Of the 122 professional sports teams in the NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB, 79 teams participated in the May, 2008 survey.

Developing a Sustainability Game Plan

1) Athletic Department leadership should be educated on sustainability issues and committed to the cause. Executive-level leadership and responsibility for departmental sustainability initiatives will be the greatest factor in success.

2) Form a cross-functional "green" team within the Athletic Department. Consider representatives from facilities, events, business admin, development, teams, corporate sales, public relations, faculty, campus-wide sustainability team and student-athletes. Encourage athletic department representation on campus-wide sustainability team to leverage expertise and to coordinate programs.

3) Develop a Strategic Sustainability Plan for the Athletic Department with short and long-term goals, business analysis, and organizational and staff requirements. Clearly define responsibilities and integrate goals into performance metrics.

4) Measure the Athletic Department's greenhouse gas emissions and other ecological impacts (i.e., water usage, waste). Prioritize initiatives based on environmental impact, return on investment and resources. Set quantitative reduction goals (i.e., GHG, Water use, waste, recycle rates) and time-lines. Embrace transparency.

5) Assess fan, employee and student-athlete interest in environmental issues via surveys, and focus groups.

6) Assess new revenue opportunities: fundraising/development for sustainability initiatives, corporate sponsorship and green advertising.

7) Actively engage athletic department employees, student-athletes, teams and student body in environmental initiatives. Regularly communicate to stakeholders.

8) Be "authentic." Avoid any hint of greenwashing. Be forthright about your eco-faults.

9) Create active and visible green initiatives that continuously "touch" fans. Big splash announcements without ongoing development and visibility of the green program will be largely ineffective.

10) Aim to stand out—differentiate your program. Still plenty of opportunities to be "the first athletic department that..."

Survey bias

1) Athletic Departments that responded to the Survey may be the “greenest” organizations. Contacts were encouraged to respond even if there had no green program or they were just starting out. It may be that the athletic departments that have the most advanced green programs would be more eager to respond and want the results. And yet, an athletic department that has yet to develop a green strategy may also be likely to respond in order to receive the survey results.

2) Individual contacts within the organization may be more likely to be the most environmentally-friendly and answer questions with a pro-green bias.

3) Individual contacts may not understand the university’s overall environmental strategies and plan. 96 out of 97 the survey respondents were Associate or Assistant Athletic Directors, Facilities Directors, Facilities Managers, or Sustainability Managers. 90 out of 97 respondents were from within the Athletic Department; the remaining 7 were from campus-wide departments. More than 8 out of 10 respondents expressed an opinion on key-decision makers’ view on profitability and fan loyalty considerations, an indication of the respondents’ knowledge of athletic department strategy. However, survey respondents may not be knowledgeable of the university-wide sustainability strategy or practices (e.g., greenhouse gas inventory). Only 16% of the survey respondents indicated that their President had signed the American College and University Presidents Climate Agreement whereas 61 out of 119 (52%) of Presidents of these schools have signed the agreement

4) The survey instructions specified only one response per university. The survey software prevented an individual from submitting more than one response from the same computer. It was possible for an individual to forward the link within the organization presenting the possibility of multiple responses per team. However, the initial email and survey instructions emphasized the importance of a single responder per university. Plus, there were no two people from a university who requested results.

5) Comparisons with the survey responses to the Professional Sports Survey are for identical questions in both surveys except for responses to the question about developing a sustainability plan. In the Pro Sport Survey, it was asked whether the organization was integrating green plans with business plans which typically include defining a strategy and goal setting.

In the spirit of 100% transparency, I am providing a link to the full survey results - all questions, unfiltered answers and comments. It takes very little time to review the results and assess where your organization stands versus the leading programs. For full access to survey results, including all respondent comments, please click on: [2009 NCAA Athletic Department Sustainability Survey Results](#) ■

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Although professional sports organizations and university athletic departments have different organizational missions and goals, it may be of interest to look at and compare some of the survey results.

Sustainability Survey Results

NCAA Athletic Departments**

Professional Teams***

Organization has developed or is actively planning to develop a strategic sustainability plan*

25.0%

72.2%

Key decision makers have a “strongly positive” perception on implementing environmental initiatives

33.3%

55.7%

Organization is currently measuring or firmly planning to measure greenhouse gas emissions (carbon footprint)

8.8%

46.8%

Key decision makers say that environmental programs will “slightly increase” or “significantly increase” profitability

15.8%

38.0%

Key decision makers say that environmental programs will “slightly increase” or “significantly increase” brand loyalty.

30.2%

60.8%

Organization wants to collect more information on fans’ concerns for environmental issues.

37.9%

83.6%

“Slightly concerned” or “very concerned” that environmental programs will distract from main goals of organization

43.5%

26.6%

* See comments on survey-to-survey comparisons in “Discussion of Survey Bias” below.

** NCAA Sustainability Practices Survey conducted April, 2009; 97 out of 119 FBS universities responded. Survey error: +/-3.6% at 90% confidence level.

*** Professional Sports Sustainability Practices Survey conducted May, 2008. 79 out of 122 professional teams responded. Survey error: +/- 5.5% at 90% confidence level.