

Pac-12 Changemaker Program

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In sports, there is a decades long history of athlete activism and athletes using their platform as sports icons to open discussions into societal issues. Famous examples, such as Muhammad Ali's protest of the Vietnam War, Tommie Smith and John Carlos' black power salute, and LeBron James' stand for equality demonstrate the role that sports plays within society. This often referred to "platform" of sports has the ability to reach a global audience. Billions of people around the world call themselves soccer fans, and "88% of Americans age 12 or older are fans of at least one sport" (Klein, 2014). College athletes have a similar platform, and this can be used to vault sustainability into the national discussion. Currently, student athlete involvement in sustainability is limited to self-started initiatives, as seen with groups at Oregon State, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania. These initiatives center around a few motivated student athletes or staff who drive progress, without any top-down facilitation. This project sought to answer the question of how to engage student athletes in sustainability on a more consistent basis from an institutional level within the Pacific-12 (Pac-12) Conference.

When answering this question, two main factors had to be accounted for: student athlete time constraints, and the value proposition for student athletes. Strict NCAA rules on total time spent doing "countable athletically related activities" and a survey of student athletes time constraints showed that time is a precious resource for them. Because of this, a value proposition had to be developed that would strategically place sustainability to drive participation. The Pac-12 Changemaker Program was formed to around the value proposition of allowing student athletes to speak up about causes that they are passionate about and using sustainability as a lens to promote the cause and advocate for systemic change through the university's social media. Their personal stories can be tied to a larger narrative and use storytelling techniques to simplify abstract concepts. With a need to move past raising awareness and into action, the popularity of social media provides the opportunity to reach younger generations and take a constructive approach to avoid further polarizing an issue.

A model was formed for replication across multiple campuses and was built to be flexible enough to take advantage of existing opportunities. The four steps are (1) approach, (2) engage, (3) involve, and (4) promote. The model was tested on the Arizona State University (ASU)

campus in conjunction with University Sustainability Practices, the Zero Waste Department, and Sun Devil Athletics to work within their existing green game initiatives and sustainability certification process. A focus group was also conducted to find what student athletes might speak out about, and to receive feedback on the program.

The final result of this project was a program handbook for the Pac-12 that outlines a new sustainability vision encompassing all three pillars, an argument for the creation of the program, each pillar of the model, and the findings from the ASU case study. In doing so, they will have a guide for the fundamentals of the program and have a resource ready for when they are ready to expand to other member universities.

As for the pilot testing, University Sustainability Practices and the Zero Waste Department agreed to adopt the program. This program comes at a time when they are looking to move past only green games and traditional sustainability. The handbook was given to them, with a set of recommendations of how to facilitate implementation, how to incorporate the program into the existing certification process and around the green game engagement process, and how to tie the program into the sports culture of ASU through messaging and opportunities for collaboration with other on-campus organizations.

This project represents a first step in understanding how to tap into engaging student athletes in sustainability. The feedback from student athletes indicates that while they are excited about the idea of using their platform and voice to champion a cause, the most prevalent issue is a lack of time in their schedule. Those most likely to speak out tend to be already involved in other activities, further limiting the amount of work they can put into taking themselves through this process. Action steps have to be clearly laid out for engaging in the program, and the value proposition has to be consistently adjusted to meet the needs of athletes. Sustainability has to be defined clearly when talking through an issue, so that the athlete can grasp it and fluently talk about it. For the future, the foundation for the program has been laid, but the process needs to be tested. There is potential for someone to take the reins on the project and serve as the project manager, who reaches out to athletes, holds exploratory meetings with them, and collects information from the athlete to write their story.

From an institutional level, the results of the ASU case study completely reframed the fundamental question that this project aimed to address. Instead of this being a program that was focused on student-athlete involvement in sustainability, the question became “how can an institution not just allow but *facilitate* athlete activism?”. In producing the handbook for the Pac-12 and ASU, it was clear that this project was not just about sustainability; rather, it’s about using sustainability to change the status quo of an institutional fear related to athlete activism. By housing activism under sustainability within the conference and university, they can become comfortable with the idea that activism can be a positive force that drives real change. With the foundation of the program laid, this project represents the first step in that process.