

# Athletic Fundraising: An In-depth Analysis of the Challenges Faced and Strategies Utilized in the NCAA Division II Athletic Landscape

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In the current economic environment, state appropriations to higher education are continually decreasing, with cuts in state aid resulting in universities undergoing significant financial cuts. In particular, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II athletic departments have been seriously impacted. The Division II structure requires athletic programs to depend on private, charitable contributions, brought in through organized fundraising activities. This study used the previous athletic fundraising literature and stakeholder theory to guide 14 semi-structured interviews with Division II athletic fundraisers, representing a wide range of public universities. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise for Division II athletic departments face as well as the strategies that are being used to overcome those challenges. This study also aimed to identify the role that stakeholders played in athletic fundraising and how stakeholder claims of power, urgency, and legitimacy guided the fundraising process. Theoretical and practical implications are also advanced.

*Keywords:* athletic fundraising, Division II, intercollegiate athletics, stakeholder theory

## Introduction

In trying economic times, state appropriations to higher education have decreased. Academic programs, faculty positions, student scholarships, and athletic departments have all undergone significant financial cuts (Mitchell et al., 2017), including at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II level, whose athletic departments are not self-supporting. In fact, a primary revenue source for these departments includes support from state governments through designated funds for intercollegiate athletics (DeSchrive, 2009). Another essential revenue stream for NCAA Division II athletic programs are charitable contributions, which are procured through organized fundraising strategies (Fulks, 2019). Overall, the



summary of data from 2019 showed the median generated revenue for Division II schools with football was \$887,000 compared to a median expense of \$7.4 million. Meanwhile, schools not sponsoring football saw a similar gap between median revenue (\$414,000) and expenses (\$5.8 million) (Fulks, 2019).

Due to their reliance on shrinking state funds, financial perils facing Division II schools are prevalent. Often times, small, across-the-board cuts are not sufficient and sport reductions must occur (DeSchrive, 2009). This reduction of state support has recently impacted NCAA Division II institutions. For example, following the conclusion of the 2017 football season, Humboldt State University (CA) was forced to privately raise \$500,000 to continue operation of its football program as the university faced a spending reduction of \$9 million over its next budget cycle. The athletic department failed to reach that amount, and a month prior to the 2018 season, the university announced it would discontinue the program (Humboldt State, 2018). In 2019, St. Cloud State University eliminated its football and men's and women's golf programs, citing budget and Title IX concerns (Hertel, 2019). As more Division II athletic departments are forced to eliminate sport programs due to budget constraints, the importance of fundraising has never been more apparent. Philanthropic gifts are a key to generating additional revenue dollars that can alleviate the financial strains associated with increased scholarship costs, coaching salaries, and operating budgets (Plinske, 1999).

Like Division I, Division II offers student-athletes financial aid packages. However, the amount of scholarships Division II schools can provide are far fewer than Division I. For example, under current NCAA regulations, Division I programs at the highest level can provide up to 85 scholarships in the sport of football, while Division II programs have a cap of 36 ("Division II Partial-Scholarship Model," 2016). Division II also has a unique partial athletic scholarship model that allows a further range of student-athletes to receive athletic-related financial aid. Unlike Division I, Division II athletic departments' budgets are exponentially smaller. However, different from the Division III level, whose budgets these institutions most likely mirror, Division II programs still provide athletic scholarships, while Division III does not, thus positioning these schools as a hybrid of Division I and III in terms of funding philosophy.

Athletic fundraising and the way professionals manage stakeholders at the Division II level are unique because of the size of the institutions and athletic departments as well as the drastically smaller budgets, compared to their Division I peers. Stakeholders of all kinds can influence or be influenced by an organization and its hierarchy. A Division II athletic department's ability to engage in successful fundraising is essential for its sustained growth and operation. Fundraising's relevance has maintained critical importance due to the financial fallout that has resulted from sport cancellations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Torres, 2020). To date, most studies have focused on the issues and trends regarding fundraising at the Division I level and have not examined fundraising at the Division II level.

The purpose of this exploratory study, therefore, was to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise for Division II athletic departments face

as well as the strategies that are being used to overcome those challenges. From a theoretical perspective, this study is significant because it will help scholars develop a deeper understanding of Division II athletic fundraising from a stakeholder management perspective, with a particular focus on those with power, urgency, and legitimacy. Additionally, this study provides managerial insights into the challenges that athletic fundraisers face at the Division II level.

## Theoretical Framework

While widely used in strategic management, Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory aptly applies to the Division II athletic fundraising context. Stakeholder theory recognizes that businesses and non-profits alike have several agendas and stakeholder needs that they must serve. Freeman argued that organizations must create as much value as possible for these stakeholders because they can influence strategic direction and also be influenced by the organization. There is a history of scholars applying stakeholder theory within the sport management field as well as athletic fundraising (Covell, 2004, 2005; Huml & Cintron, 2021; Steadland, 2015; Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011). Athletic departments are multi-level organizations comprised of numerous stakeholders (athletic directors, chancellors, coaches, and donors) with influence, both internally and externally.

Mitchell et al. (1997) defined a stakeholder as an entity such as a person, group, community, institution, and even the environment that are influenced by the firm. Freeman considered a stakeholder to be "Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (1984, p. 25). In athletic fundraising, these stakeholders can include coaches, administrators, alumni, donors, the local community, and other university and foundation personnel. Stakeholders have a direct impact on an organization's success or failure. In a Division II athletic fundraising environment, stakeholders can influence success or failure by more than simply providing or withholding donations. For instance, a coach or administrator who mismanages donor relations could deter a donor from providing funds. According to Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholders can be classified with regards to how much power, legitimacy, and urgency they have.

Salancik and Pfeffer (1974) stated that power is the ability to affect and bring change to a desired outcome. Power is one of the most prevalent concepts in athletic fundraising as it pertains to stakeholders. In a transaction-based program (one party giving another a sum of cash or cash-equivalents in exchange for an expected benefit), this claim comes into play frequently. For example, a donor who provides his or her resources ultimately has the final discretion at where those dollars may go. With regards to legitimacy, Mitchell et al.'s (1997) definition separates it from power through the distinction of authority:

An entity may have legitimate standing in society, or it may have a legitimate claim on the firm, but unless it has either power to enforce its will in the relationship or a perception that its claim is urgent, it will not achieve salience for the firm's managers. (p. 866).

Legitimacy is a social currency (Suchman, 1995). Claims of legitimacy can often occur in the athletic fundraising sector when a donor contributes to both athletic and academic endeavors. The university foundation, which is aiming to secure academic donations in this scenario, serves as the organization with the legitimate claim. In this instance, it could have a legitimate claim over the athletic development officer because academics could hold a higher, more legitimate position in the university setting. Finally, a claim has urgency when it meets two conditions: “(1) when a relationship or claim is time-sensitive in nature, and (2) when the relationship or claim is important or critical to the stakeholder” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 867). The most common example of this in a practical setting is when administrators (i.e., university presidents and athletic directors), coaches, and donors have a desire to see projects or initiatives fundraised and completed in a swift manner.

## Review of Literature

The literature on athletic fundraising has focused on the strategies and challenges surrounding the impact of winning on a department’s ability to fundraise and donors’ behaviors and motivations (Boenigk & Scherhag, 2013; Brunette et al., 2017; Covell, 2005; Huml et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Park et al., 2016; Popp et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2010; Walker, 2015). Covell (2005) applied stakeholder theory to assess the impact that winning intercollegiate athletic teams had on athletic department donations at Ivy League schools, finding that an individual’s decision to donate to an athletic department was not affected by on-field results. Furthermore, participants in the study did not expect their donations to lead to more on-field victories. Huml and Cintron (2021) examined perceived status by fundraisers as they identify, manage, and prioritize their stakeholders, finding that status was a useful tool for donor management.

Walker (2015) examined athletic department donations the year following an institution’s participation in the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Final Four and major college football bowl games over a 10-year period (2002-2011). Walker compared contributions to those schools with significant athletic department success to those departments that did not experience athletic success, concluding that there were increases in overall private support at more successful institutions.

Recent scholarship has also examined the tendencies within the Division II fundraising landscape. Kim et al. (2019) expanded upon previous research to examine donor motivations, finding that these included philanthropy commitment and power, with less focus on tangible benefits. Donor behaviors and motivations have been a consistent focus in prior research as it relates to athletic fundraising challenges and strategies (Brunette et al., 2017; Ko et al., 2014; Park et al., 2016). In order for industry professionals to secure financial charitable contributions, they must develop an understanding of the constituency groups with whom they work. This applies particularly to the concept of stakeholder theory because development officers must cultivate trust and build a knowledge base with their stakeholders to maximize financial contributions to an athletic department.

The literature has shown there are several factors that influence a donor's behavior. They include, but are not limited to: (1) whether the individual was a student-athlete at the institution (Shapiro et al., 2010); (2) whether or not that person is an alumnus (Baade & Sundberg, 1996); (3) age at which an individual's association with the school began (Popp et al., 2016); and (4) quality of customer service received by the donor (Shapiro, 2010). Fundraising units at the Division I level can have multiple individuals dedicated towards stewardship, donor relations, and even outbound ticket sales staffs (McEvoy et al., 2013). However, institutions operating at the Division II and III levels are not afforded such luxuries and must find ways to serve their constituents with limited staff. This could serve as a significant obstacle when it comes to development officers overcoming the challenges they face when fundraising at these levels due to their additional job responsibilities and limited staff sizes.

This study was guided by the following research questions, which were motivated by the literature on athletic fundraising and stakeholder theory (Covell, 2004, 2005; Huml & Cintron, 2021; Popp et al., 2016; Steadland, 2015):

Research Question (RQ) 1: What are the main challenges development officers and other athletic fundraisers face in the process of athletic fundraising at Division II institutions?

Research Question (RQ) 2: What strategies are employed by development officers and athletic fundraisers to address the challenges they face in raising funds for Division II athletic departments?

Research Question (RQ) 3: How do power, urgency, and legitimacy of stakeholders guide and shape athletic fundraising efforts at Division II institutions?

## Method

Given the exploratory nature of this study and to obtain more in-depth knowledge about the field of athletic fundraising, a qualitative approach was undertaken (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Also, due to the fact that limited research has been conducted with Division II athletic fundraising, this study was exploratory in nature, which lends itself to qualitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We chose to focus on public institutions so that we could conduct a deeper level of analysis across a set number of variables. Additionally, with the continued decrease in state funding support for higher education (Mitchell et al., 2019), public institutions have had to rely on additional revenue streams for functionality, such as philanthropy.

### Sample and Participants

The subject pool was determined through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012) in the fall of 2018. This approach was taken in order to build a portfolio of participants whose public institutions were as representative of the NCAA Division II landscape as possible. Because of this, the school (athletic department) was selected first. From there, we looked through their staff directories. Individuals with a job title centered around fundraising were selected first. In some cases, schools

had individuals overseeing external relations. After reading biographies detailing job responsibilities, some of those individuals were selected. If no such individuals could be identified, we pinpointed the athletic director as the person who met this criterion. At the time of this study, there were a total of 145 public Division II institutions spread throughout 19 conferences. The remaining four conferences (out of a total of 23), were comprised solely of private institutions.

A database was then assembled of the 145 potential schools. The goal of the sampling procedure was to conduct maximum variation sampling to have variance on multiple variables. The inclusion criteria focused on factors such as enrollment, with data taken from the most recent figures reported by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2018. This was done for consistency, as reliable, current data were not available from all institutional websites (Morse et. al., 2018). Location and on-field athletic success were also included. In order to achieve the best representation, fundraisers within athletic departments all across the United States were invited to participate (Stark-Mason, 2019). To objectively determine on-field athletic success we utilized a three-year average of rankings from the Learfield Director's Cup. Lastly, athletic department composition was factored. This included the number of NCAA sports at the institution and whether it sponsored a football program.

Based on these criteria, a total of 47 potential participants were contacted by email inviting them to participate in a semi-structured interview over the phone, video call, or in-person. A subsequent follow-up email was sent to non-respondents one to two weeks after the initial email. Overall, 14 development professionals agreed to participate in this study. Subjects had a wide range of job titles and responsibilities in addition to fundraising, with positions ranging from assistant directors of development to senior level athletic department administrators and university foundation officials. The only requirement for participants was that athletic fundraising had to be a significant component of their job responsibilities. The participant demographics are highlighted in Table 1, while the institutional profile of schools is provided in Table 2. Each institution included in this study had 1-2 dedicated fundraisers in their athletic department (outside of an athletic director).

Pseudonyms were assigned to each fundraiser to protect their identity. In total, there were 12 male participants and two female participants. These demographics are likely representative of the gender distribution in fundraising, with more males occupying athletic fundraising positions (Wanless et al., 2017).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

After Institutional Review Board approval, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews. Since every fundraiser and institution are different in their challenges and strategies, a semi-structured approach was utilized in order to acquire rich and accurate data (Creswell, 2012). Of the 14 interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, 12 occurred over the phone, while two took place in person. The interviews were digitally audio recorded, with the first author transcribing all interviews verbatim. After conducting 14 interviews, the authors determined that data saturation was reached as no new themes were emerging (Creswell, 2012).

**Table 1**  
*Participant Table*

Pseudonym	Fundraising Experience	Athletic Fundraising Experience	Employment Reporting Structure
Fundraiser 1 (School 1)	32 years	2 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 2 (School 2)	9.5 years	9.5 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 3 (School 3)	30 years	5 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 4 (School 4)	3 years	3 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 5 (School 5)	11 years	11 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 6 (School 6)	3 years	2 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 7 (School 7)	7 years	7 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 8 (School 8)	2.5 years	2.5 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 9 (School 9)	2.5 years	2.5 years	Athletic Department
Fundraiser 10 (School 10)	2 years	2 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 11 (School 11)	1.5 years	1.5 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 12 (School 12)	7 years	7 years	Dual Report
Fundraiser 13 (School 13)	18 years	5 years	Foundation
Fundraiser 14 (School 14)	13 years	13 years	Foundation

**Table 2**  
*Institutional Profiles*

Pseudonym	Location*	Enrollment	Learfield Director's Cup Finish	# of Sports (Student-Athletes)**	Football Y/N
School 1	City	20,000+	150-200	11 (200-250)	No
School 2	Suburb	5,000-10,000	50-100	11 (300-350)	Yes
School 3	Suburb	15,000-20,000	1-50	13 (300-350)	Yes
School 4	Suburb	10,000-15,000	50-100	12 (350-400)	Yes
School 5	Rural	0-5,000	100-150	13 (350-400)	Yes
School 6	Rural	0-5,000	50-100	16 (350-400)	No
School 7	Rural	10,000-15,000	50-100	14 (350-400)	Yes
School 8	City	15,000-20,000	100-150	15 (200-250)	No
School 9	Rural	5,000-10,000	50-100	20 (500+)	Yes
School 10	Suburb	10,000-15,000	1-50	15 (450-500)	Yes
School 11	Rural	5,000-10,000	50-100	13 (350-400)	Yes
School 12	Suburb	5,000-10,000	150-200	14 (400-450)	Yes
School 13	Suburb	10,000-15,000	50-100	18 (450-500)	Yes
School 14	Rural	10,000-15,000	50-100	15 (300-450)	Yes

\*Location was determined as follows, with populations details based on 2020 U.S. Census data: City – University is located in a city with more than 1,000,000 residents; Suburb – University is located within a 100 mile radius of a metropolitan area over 1,000,000; Rural – University is located outside of a 100 mile radius of a metropolitan area over 1,000,000.

\*\*Student-athlete data was obtained from the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) 2019-20 database report.

The interview guide was grounded in stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and developed based on the literature in athletic fundraising (Martinez et al., 2010; Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011; Stinson & Howard, 2008). Sample questions included: “What are the biggest challenges when it comes to athletic fundraising at your particular institution?”; “Broadly speaking, what do you think are the biggest factors that lead to successful athletic fundraising at the Division II level?”; and “What group of stakeholders have the most influence upon your fundraising decisions and why?” As the interviews progressed, questions were added because of the iterative and free-flowing nature of the conversations. An example of a question that was added is: “What impact do winning teams have on your ability to fundraise, if at all?”

Data were first analyzed through a priori coding based on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and the athletic fundraising literature (Boenigk & Scherhag, 2013; Popp et al., 2016). The data were coded initially to the challenges and strategies that athletic fundraisers faced as identified in the literature, and with regards to stakeholder theory (Creswell, 2012). A second round of open coding occurred in order to identify emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Table 3 outlines the key themes as well as sample and selective codes that were identified as challenges and strategies.

**Table 3***Challenges – Key Themes, Sample Codes, and Selective Codes*

Focus	Key themes (stage)	Representative code (# of mentions)
Challenges	Institutional factors (A, O)	Culture of giving (6) Institutional history (6) Institutional support (6)
Challenges	Investment in fundraising (A, O)	Staffing (15) Budget (4) Lack of AD fundraising (3)
Challenges	Other donor interests/fatigue (A)	Academic interests (4) Competition vs. larger schools (4) Donor fatigue (3)
Challenges	Relationship with foundation (A, O)	Communication with foundation (5) Collaboration with foundation (4) Foundation resources (2)
Challenges	Success of athletic teams (A)	Inability to leverage wins (5) Lack of athletic department success (3) Reliance on winning (3)
Strategies	Role of stakeholders (A, O)	Coaches' engagement & involvement (15) Student-athlete connection (13) Student-athlete experience (3)
Strategies	Building & growing donor base (A)	Engaging constituents (7) Building donor relationships (4) Alumni word of mouth (3)
Strategies	Strategic fundraising plan (A, O)	Identifying sport program needs (6) Developing annual fund (5) Identifying donor interests (5)
Strategies	Relationship with foundation (A, O)	Collaboration with foundation (9) Access to foundation resources (8) Internal communication (5)
Strategies	Investment in fundraising (A, O)	Institutional support (8) Athletic director involvement (5) Staffing (3)

Note: The table also reflects the stage of coding – a priori (A) and open (O).



In qualitative research, it is necessary for a researcher to ensure trustworthiness, dependability, and credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To help address these issues, confidentiality was ensured to participants, their respective institutions, and athletic departments. This encouraged participants to speak honestly about the issues, strategies, and challenges. Member checking was utilized to enhance the dependability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview transcripts were sent to each participant to review for accuracy and clarity. Study interpretations were also sent to participants for member checking to enhance the credibility of the results. While limited responses were received for this member check, the three participants who responded to this inquiry were in agreement with the interpretations. To further enhance credibility of this study, a peer debriefer was also utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An assistant dean for advancement at a major Midwestern university with many years of experience in athletics and university fundraising served as the peer debriefer. This individual was in agreement with the findings and interpretations from this study.

## Findings

First, findings related to RQ 1 will be presented, followed by the findings related to RQ 2. The findings for RQ 3, the role that power, urgency, and legitimacy have in the athletic fundraising process, will be addressed throughout the first two sections.

### **RQ 1: Challenges Facing Division II Athletic Fundraisers**

The first research question aimed to identify the core challenges that athletic fundraisers face in the NCAA Division II landscape. The key challenges that were most frequently mentioned included: 1) institutional factors, 2) investment in fundraising, 3) other donor interests and fatigue, 4) relationship with foundation, and 5) success of athletic teams.

#### Institutional Factors

All but one of the participants cited institutional factors as a barrier when it came to fundraising for athletics. These barriers were a result of elements both inside and outside of an athletic department that impacted the success of athletic fundraising. For the most part, these factors were uncontrollable for the development officers. Fundraiser 10 succinctly summarized the challenges related to the university's philanthropic history as: "That institutional buy-in and having the resources, no question is the number one obstacle."

Institutional support can be viewed through two lenses: the university's prioritization of athletics and the institution's financial support of athletics, which overall were mentioned by five different fundraisers. Intercollegiate athletics can rank low on an institution's or president's priority list. When it comes to creating a vision and plan for athletic fundraising and the department, the administrative focus on athletics can play a factor, as strategic direction for an organization begins at the top of a hierarchical pyramid. The de-prioritization of athletics on a campus can

happen regardless of on-field athletic success. Fundraiser 1 mentioned that athletics has been deprioritized for years at their institution:

We had a president that tried to do away with intercollegiate athletics. It was the culmination of a number of years of deprioritizing intercollegiate athletics. That has had a ripple effect in terms of alumni's willingness or interest in engaging with the university in general.

However, Fundraiser 3 shared one of the reasons donors may not give to athletics at his institution, despite their on-field success, was because "we're not a particularly school-spirited campus. The students typically don't rally around athletics, so there is just not the intensity that I think some donors like and get at the Division I level."

Intercollegiate athletics being deprioritized on campus can occur regardless of on-field success, as our participants illustrated. For fundraisers, this can create an unenviable situation. In this case, the institution serves as an internal stakeholder with power, as the university has control of athletics in this situation. When an individual donor has the claim of power, they hold far less of it when compared to the institution itself. A donor also has power in deciding whether or not to donate due to a lack of on-field athletic success.

### Investment in Fundraising

An investment in athletic fundraising was the second-most cited challenge. Ten out of 14 participants mentioned issues relating to staffing, fundraising budgets, and how their other job responsibilities can inhibit their engagement in fundraising activities. Because of the nature of Division II, athletic departments are smaller and staffing is limited. As was evidenced in Table 1, only four athletic departments even had fundraisers employed directly by their unit, reporting directly to the athletic director.

A lack of dedicated fundraising professionals presents challenges. Fundraiser 4 is tasked with securing donations for a number of sports, including football, at an institution with an enrollment between 10,000-15,000. He noted: "If you can't expand your staff or your ability to reach all of those people, you're essentially leaving money on the table just because you can't make the ask."

In addition to funding the actual positions, having a budget to engage in fundraising activities is also a challenge. Fundraisers shared about how they would like to see additional staff members, as an increase in budget would increase their capability to raise funds. Fundraiser 5 highlighted: "I think that is one of the main things, and it's not just Division II, its smaller universities. They may not be able to fund the position well enough for it to be successful."

### Other Donor Interests and Fatigue

It is not uncommon for individuals to have multiple philanthropic interests. Athletic fundraisers are vying for these philanthropic dollars in a crowded market (i.e., competition). As individuals and families show a willingness to give, other non-profits in a community may ask for similar support, and this can lead to donor fatigue. Other donor interests and donor fatigue were discussed by nine fundraisers.

One of the biggest competing interests athletic fundraisers face is Division I athletic programs. For institutions who are in the backyard of a Division I school, the smaller Division II program can be a secondary interest for donors. In essence, Division I schools may have more legitimacy in the eyes of donors. Four fundraisers talked about the need to gain legitimacy with their stakeholder groups, as illustrated by Fundraiser 3:

We kind of live in the shadow of (redacted institution name), even though we're 90 miles away. We have a lot of people in our town who have (redacted institution name) season tickets and drive down to the games. I think that some donors really like to get caught up in the frenzy of Division I athletics. Another challenge in a crowded intercollegiate athletics environment is building affinity for their program and student-athletes from donors, alumni, and community members. Fundraiser 10 explained: "My student-athlete could walk out on the court here and half the town hasn't met him yet because it's his first game. I think we have to go a little bit further in building that affinity and then translating that affinity to philanthropic giving."

### Relationships with University Foundation

Division I programs often have their entire athletic fundraising arm as a unit within the athletic department, separate from the campus' central advancement unit. That is not the case for programs at other NCAA levels. For example, Fundraiser 7 reports to a foundation executive. He shared about his athletic department's relationship with the campus foundation: "At Division II, you may not have that level of involvement or engagement from the institution to give you the help you need, and that can be a very difficult thing." In many ways, this gives credence of power and urgency to the university.

Most of the challenges focused around a lack of communication between the two units. Foundation offices have access to greater resources, such as software programs that keep track of donor information, prospect tracking and development lists, and wealth screening and identification. In these situations, the foundation has additional legitimacy over athletic departments. Fundraiser 9 is an athletic administrator with no direct reports in the foundation and described the relationship between the two units: "I think there can definitely be more communication and more cohesiveness between the two of us, and look at it more as partners instead of competitors."

A lack of collaboration and communication between individual fundraisers and campus units can present additional challenges, such as possessiveness of donors. Fundraiser 8 reports directly to her athletic director, and shared: "That's a problem across the divisions where advancement departments are territorial of their donors and they want to make sure that athletics isn't taking over their donors or trying to steal them." A foundation office by itself does not necessarily have more power, urgency, or legitimacy than other internal stakeholders such as the institution's leadership team. However, when combined, the foundation's claim encourages an athletic department to be a collaborative partner rather than a more individualistic one.

## Success of Athletics Teams

Finally, one of the iterative questions that emerged as the conversations continued was the impact of winning athletics teams. For some, as eight fundraisers mentioned, winning or a lack thereof was a challenge. Fundraisers 2, 3, and 13 all fundraise for athletic departments that had a Learfield Director's Cup three-year composite average in the top-100. They spoke about the challenge of highlighting wins to their donor base, as illustrated by Fundraiser 2: "I don't think there is a direct correlation between winning and an increase in fundraising. Unless you have a solid team behind that can kind of help mold that, but I think it is a very particular case-by-case instance."

Fundraiser 3 noted that from his first-hand experience, winning has not made his job any easier: "We've had some national championship teams here and we've not seen a boost in fundraising for those particular teams. We're very successful athletically and academically, but there just is not that feeling of great excitement around athletics."

## RQ 2: Strategies for Division II Athletic Fundraisers

The second research question aimed to uncover the main strategies that athletic fundraisers utilize in the NCAA Division II landscape to address fundraising challenges. The primary strategies are: 1) capitalizing on the role of stakeholders, 2) building and growing a donor base, 3) developing a strategic fundraising plan, 4) cultivating a relationship with the foundation, and 5) investing in fundraising.

### Capitalizing on the Role of Stakeholders

Stakeholders play a critical role in the success of an athletic fundraising program. The utilization and recognition of stakeholders was a prominent strategy for success. Thirteen development officers mentioned the role that stakeholders play in the success of athletic fundraising. The two most frequently mentioned stakeholders when it came to the strategic approaches in fundraising were coaches and student-athletes.

Additionally, each interviewee was asked what group of stakeholders had the most influence on their fundraising decisions. The sub-themes explore the stakeholders with power (donors), legitimacy (coaches), and urgency (institutional leadership). While not as significant as coaches, fundraisers did note the legitimacy that student-athletes provide to the fundraising process. Stakeholders with urgency – the institutional leadership – will be explicated in the strategy of investment in fundraising.

**Role of Donors.** Donors are an incredibly important stakeholder group when it comes to athletic fundraising, as they have the claim of power. Each fundraiser was asked which stakeholder group had the most influence, and donor was the most commonly mentioned stakeholder, noted by eight interviewees. External stakeholder donors who are not student-athletes can be a variety of individuals, such as non-athletic alumni of the institution, friends of the university, and other community

members. Fundraiser 5 shared that his athletic department's most important stakeholders were engaged alumni and community members, noting that by nature of giving a donation, donors become invested in a program. This can then have a trickle-down effect to other donors:

They are the ones who are already invested . . . I think as you're asking more donors, showing them that appreciation and consideration from your current donors only helps them tell the story and build trust and equity amongst other constituent groups. Now others are saying this donor has had a really good experience. That is how I know to trust you guys.

**Role of Coaches.** Nine fundraisers noted the role that coaches play in their success, with six fundraisers mentioning that coaches were their most influential stakeholder. The data shows coaches play an essential role in the engagement and cultivation of donors. Fundraiser 7 re-iterated: "I think it's the biggest factor. Coaches need to have that idea of identification of working people through the development process. There may be four or five people that are really intimate with a (sport) program that I don't know, but the coaches will." Coaches who are engaged and involved in the fundraising process can have a positive impact on athletic fundraising. By the nature of their position, coaches have an intimate knowledge and legitimacy about their program and its needs. They have the ability to identify additional potential donors and further enhance a relationship between a donor and the athletic department in a way that a fundraiser may not be able to do.

In order to effectively utilize coaches in the fundraising process, it is first necessary for development officers to build a relationship and foster trust with their coaches. Fundraiser 1 spoke to this: "I've definitely found that in the sports that I don't have a relationship with the coaches, I get a no – I'm just another guy who's asking them to do something." As soon as that trust is built, coaches are often more willing to be a part of the process. Fundraiser 10 added: "All of my coaches know that if I've got a donor in town or on campus who wants to see them, I'm not asking to take their time unless there's a purpose." Thus, it is important for coaches to feel a sense of urgency when it comes to fundraising.

**Role of Student-Athletes.** Another heavily emphasized internal stakeholder group was student-athletes, with nine respondents mentioning the role student-athletes play in the fundraising process. The fundraisers' strategies centered around sharing student-athlete stories and focusing on connecting student-athletes with their donor base. Following a fundraising auction, Fundraiser 2 sent out a survey seeking feedback from donors, sharing: "Everyone, 20 out of 21 people, said their favorite part was the student-athlete. That's kind of my goal is to tell more of the student-athlete story." He added: "They are amazed at the stories that they have . . . [Division II] is truly about the student-athlete experience. Donors like hearing that. The student-athletes are a big thing."

There is value in all stakeholder groups, but as the data shows, leveraging stakeholders with legitimacy (coaches) and catering a fundraising program towards

stakeholders with power (donors) can be an effective fundraising strategy, particularly as it pertains to stakeholder involvement.

### Building and Growing a Donor Base

An athletic department's donor base is one of its most important stakeholder groups. Donors are stakeholders with power, and fundraisers view them as having the most influence upon their fundraising decisions. Strategies for building and growing an athletics donor base focused on engagement with stakeholders, such as alumni and former student-athletes, and spreading the athletic department message through word of mouth. Eleven fundraisers pointed to this strategy.

In order to effectively grow and build a donor base, fundraisers look to the relationships they are cultivating or additional relationships they might need to build, highlighting the urgency with which a fundraiser needs to operate. This is even more important for Division II schools because fundraisers are more reliant on altruistic-based gifts, rather than transactional-based gifts like Division I is (Popp et al., 2016). Fundraiser 9 related:

I think there's a lot of, when you get to bigger Division I schools, there's more of the return on investment, so it's more of a business transaction. While we do have a lot of partners that feel that way, it's also about a greater cause in the student-athlete success and scholarships. I think having those relationships . . . is the most important thing, and if they trust you then they're going to be more inclined to give.

The trust that is built between a fundraiser and their stakeholders is an essential component to successful athletic fundraising. However, a fundraiser can leverage their stakeholders, particularly donors, to develop trust amongst one another. In essence, they can build a word of mouth understanding that is shared from one stakeholder to another that creates additional support. Fundraiser 13 alluded to this: "We can say it over and over again, but if it comes from an alum, it makes a huge difference. They'll believe them quicker than they'll believe us." This demonstrated the legitimacy that donors and alumni can have within their own stakeholder group.

### Developing a Strategic Fundraising Plan

Strategic planning is an essential component for developing a successful athletic fundraising plan. Every fundraiser was asked what their department's athletic fundraising program entailed, and they noted aspects such as an annual fund, capital campaigns, alumni reunions, and golf tournaments. However, in order to engage in successful athletic fundraising, a clear strategic plan must be in place in order to achieve the greatest engagement with stakeholders. This can then lead to additional fundraising dollars. While every fundraiser talked about what their athletic fundraising program entailed, 10 fundraisers emphasized the need to be strategic in their fundraising.

Fundraiser 10 said: "It begins with our annual fund, no question. That is the bread and butter." Fundraiser 7 felt similarly: "I think the very first thing you start with when you look at something in Division II, when I'm coming into an operation

... is the foundational pyramid of annual gifts.” Annual funds lay the groundwork for an athletic fundraising strategic plan. Not only does it serve as a revenue source, it also provides a donor base from which an athletic department can work. Fundraiser 6 added what he thought led to successful athletic fundraising at the Division II level: “I think first and foremost that we have some kind of plan . . . I think it begins with a plan, and then with that plan complementing the booster club and fundraising projects.” Having a strategic plan highlighted a stakeholder group’s legitimacy and urgency.

The practice of athletic fundraising involves matching a donor’s interest with an athletic department’s need. Because of this, another aspect of a strategic fundraising plan is having clearly identified program needs. This is where athletic fundraisers need to rely on internal stakeholders, such as coaches, in order to have the best insight into what needs there might be. Fundraiser 7 noted the importance of coaches identifying program needs and leveraging their legitimacy towards the fundraiser, “They need to create a tangible list of what the program needs. People ask ‘how can I help out the program’? I’m not sure what the volleyball program needs, but the coach is able to talk about that tangible list.”

### Cultivating a Relationship with the Foundation

There is no doubt that a strong partnership between an athletic department and a university’s central advancement unit has a positive impact on an athletic fundraiser’s ability to do their job. Ten fundraisers noted aspects that a positive relationship with a foundation had on their ability to engage in successful fundraising activities. The groundwork for this success begins with collaborative efforts amongst the two entities. As a result of that, athletic departments gain access to highly useful foundation resources. Communication is at the core of this strategy. Fundraiser 7 is housed in the athletic department but reports to an individual in the campus’ main foundation office. He spoke to multiple benefits that can come from utilizing foundation assets: “We have the foundation and all of their expertise – all of their knowledge available to us.” Fundraiser 11 talked about the value in the partnership between the two campus units: “I couldn’t do it under one area of just athletics or the foundation. Being able to bounce ideas off everyone and using the tangible resources – you have to have that partnership.” For the fundraisers, foundation offices can serve as a stakeholder group with great legitimacy.

### Investing in Fundraising

An investment in fundraising is a direct way to combat the biggest challenges in Division II athletic fundraising, that of staffing, budget constraints, and other job responsibilities outside of fundraising. Nine fundraisers mentioned investments in athletic fundraising that they have been able to utilize as a strategy. Additionally, two fundraisers noted institutional leadership as the stakeholder that had the greatest impact on their fundraising decisions.

To be successful, the investment in fundraising has to start at the athletic department level. Fundraiser 14 said: “You have to have that buy in from the coaches,

from the AD [athletic director] and knowing that everyone is on the same page.” Fundraiser 5 added: “For example, we have one main fundraiser for philanthropy for athletics and that’s me. To be able to fund the operation of that where if I need to hop on a plane and go to Phoenix to talk to an alum, I need to be able to do that. And they do.”

## Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the major challenges that individuals who fundraise for NCAA Division II athletic departments face as well as the strategies that are being used to overcome those challenges. In addition, this study aimed to better understand how stakeholders were involved through the claims of power, urgency, and legitimacy and the impact they have in the athletic fundraising process and experience (Mitchell et al., 1997).

### **RQ 1: Challenges Facing Division II Athletic Fundraisers**

The first research question focused on the main challenges development officers and other athletic fundraisers face in the process of athletic fundraising at Division II institutions. The overarching theme surrounding these challenges was the fact that several of them were uncontrollable by the fundraiser. For instance, a development officer has no control over what other philanthropic opportunities may be nearby, such as a Division I athletic program. Additionally, the investment that is made in athletic fundraising is determined by the university itself. Athletic departments can have some input in showcasing the need for a fundraising position and budget, however, the final decision on the financial investment in athletic fundraising is not established by the fundraiser. Much of the previous literature has focused on athletic fundraising in the Division I environment, where fundraisers are typically given the resources they need to succeed (Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011; Popp et al., 2016). While studies have focused on Division III fundraising and the associated landscape (Feezell, 2009; Katz et al., 2015), there has not been a focus placed on the financial investment that Division II athletic fundraising receives. Again, Division II is in a unique position because of the scholarship component that must be fundraised for, while Division III does not provide scholarships to student-athletes. Therefore, Division III fundraisers do not have to necessarily operate under the same urgency as Division II fundraisers.

The institutional investment made in athletic fundraising is uncontrollable by the fundraiser for the most part. The athletic department and fundraisers can express need for additional support, but it presents challenges if the university leadership does not view athletic fundraising as a priority. Institutional investment as it relates to staffing and budgets is one of the noteworthy differentiators between Division I and II. If a university has a smaller donor base with a more limited capacity to give, this can present additional obstacles for the fundraiser because of the institution’s alumni composition. As the data shows, the institution can be a stakeholder with power,



urgency, and legitimacy, and the university can often reflect all three simultaneously. This dynamic can evince uncontrollable factors for the athletic fundraiser.

Institutional barriers encompassed many of the challenges faced by fundraisers. Given that some participants were also fundraisers for areas outside of athletics, there could be conflicts of interest that cause internal strife. These challenges could be more unique to Division II due to these conflicts, as there is the expectation for athletics fundraisers that athletics should always be prioritized when that is not always reasonable in a higher education setting.

Another aspect identified in the literature was the role that winning athletic teams have on the success of fundraising (Stinson & Howard, 2008). However, results of the current study demonstrated this is not always the case at the Division II level. Fundraisers worked with athletic programs with great on-field success and with limited on-field success, and winning did not necessarily increase their ability to fundraise. Because Division II takes a more holistic approach to intercollegiate athletics, the emphasis at this level is placed on finding balance between academics and athletics. While winning is important in Division II, it is not the be-all goal that some Division I athletic departments have.

Much of the literature has focused on internal factors for mitigating challenges such as providing quality customer service to donors (Shapiro, 2010) or understanding donor motivations (Kim et al., 2019). The literature has focused primarily on fundraising at Division I institutions with abundant resources, and there has not been as much attention given to the ability of fundraisers to do their job at the Division II level. The current study showed a need for Division II fundraisers to effectively and efficiently perform their job responsibilities, and these factors include having the resources to effectively cultivate, solicit, and steward their donors and having a large enough staff to engage with an athletic department's entire donor base.

While there were varying responses from fundraisers at each of the schools, there were no noticeable differences based on institutional variables such as location, enrollment, Learfield Director's Cup Finish, number of varsity sports, and whether or not the institution sponsored football. For instance, as we noted in the findings for RQ 1, fundraisers at three institutions (Schools 2, 3, and 13) all experienced similar challenges related to fundraising based on athletic success. However, they had varying levels of enrollment and numbers of sponsored sports. Fundraiser 5 worked at one of the smallest schools, and he found donors to be his most important stakeholder group, despite their smaller alumni base.

This lack of difference could be due to the small-scale landscape that athletic fundraising operations have at the Division II level. While all of the schools in this study had an individual who has a core job function related to fundraising (beyond an athletic director or coach), there are athletic departments in Division II that do not have any staff members with a sole focus on fundraising. As such, the staffing concerns and budget constraints of Division II may not allow athletic departments to build fully robust development programs, and they may tend to resemble each other due to isomorphism, which would lead to similar challenges. Fundraisers who

are tasked with raising funds for multiple areas on a campus could also be further challenged by conflicting priorities such as an expectation that athletics should always be prioritized when that in fact may not always be the case.

## **RQ 2: Strategies Utilized by Division II Athletic Fundraisers**

Our second research question sought to identify strategies employed by development officers and athletic fundraisers to address the challenges they face in raising funds for Division II athletic departments. The strategic utilization of stakeholders was the most widely implemented strategy. Three stakeholder groups were identified when it came to developing strategies: coaches, student-athletes, and donors.

Significant strategies noted in the literature demonstrated the importance of having a strategic fundraising plan (Walker, 2015; Wanless et al., 2017). Similarly, the findings of the current study highlight the need for departments to have a strategic, robust fundraising plan that extends beyond just fundraising activities. In the same respect that a poor relationship between an athletic department and university foundation can create challenges, a positive relationship can make all the difference (Plinske, 1999). Findings from the current study suggest athletic fundraisers should focus on building communication and collaboration with a central advancement unit. Foundation offices are stakeholders with legitimacy, as they have a plethora of resources for athletic fundraisers particularly those that are not employed directly by the foundation.

As Division II schools are typically smaller in size than their Division I counterparts with fewer students and employees, it is possible for athletic departments and fundraisers to build close working relationships across campus. Legitimacy is a strategy that can be utilized to demonstrate departmental knowledge, such as articulating what occurs within athletic departments and what athletics can provide to a campus. By utilizing their legitimacy, fundraisers can develop urgency amongst other university stakeholders to further demonstrate their needs (i.e., the need to have the ability to fundraise for scholarships, not simply budget items). In particular, this study extends the literature by identifying the challenges that athletic fundraisers deal with that occur outside of the intercollegiate athletics environment, and strategies they undertake to address these challenges.

One of the most consistent themes uncovered was the importance of bridging the relationship between an athletic department and university foundation office. We did see mixed responses on the positive or negative working relationship between the two entities based on circumstances such as institutional history or a fundraiser's employment reporting structure. However, this theme was a constant and could also be applied to future Division I or III fundraising studies. Differences in fundraising strategies related to location, number of sponsored sports, or enrollment did not surface in the findings.

## **RQ 3: Stakeholder Involvement in Division II Athletic Fundraising**

Finally, the third research question asked: How do power, urgency, and legitimacy of stakeholders guide and shape athletic fundraising efforts at Division II

institutions? The role that stakeholders play was identified as the greatest avenue to success. Perspectives on one stakeholder group – donors – were consistent with the literature. A stakeholder who is a donor can be a former student-athlete, an individual who is a non-athlete alumnus, or a friend of the university. All of those attributes are variable factors that influence a donor's behavior and motivation (Shapiro et al., 2010). It should come as no surprise that donors proved to be the most powerful stakeholder group.

In addition, coaches are stakeholders with important legitimacy. These stakeholders have the knowledge base of what their sport program and team need in order to maximize their potential. This could be scholarships, additional recruiting budget dollars, and supplies and equipment. Thus, it is paramount for fundraisers to develop relationships with their coaching staffs so that when they are visiting with other stakeholder groups they can most knowledgeably speak to individual program needs. Coaches can have a negative influence on fundraisers as well. In the current study, 11 institutions sponsored football. Football coaches could view their programs as having the most legitimacy, as they likely bring in the most revenue to their athletic department, even at the Division II level. Coaches who perceive themselves to have too much legitimacy can transition into stakeholders with power. This can create challenges for the fundraiser, especially in athletic departments where there is only one individual who is responsible for fundraising for all sport programs. The power of coaches is demonstrated in the literature, particularly in relation to donor groups, as supporters appreciate the connection they can develop with coaches (Shapiro & Ridinger, 2011; Wanless et al., 2017), and this allows coaches to leverage the legitimacy they have with their donor groups. However, if coaches develop too much power, they can develop their own agendas and create challenges for the fundraiser.

Another stakeholder group is the university and institutional leadership, who are stakeholders with urgency. While the institution can be an inhibitor or enabler to an athletic department's ability to engage in successful fundraising, the overall urgency the institutional leadership has varies from institution to institution. This could be the case due to the lack of interaction and discussion on the issues between fundraisers and university administration on a day-to-day basis. It is the athletic director who reports to the university president and is involved in those daily conversations, not the athletic fundraiser.

In addition, capitalizing on the role of student-athletes was identified as a common strategic link across all institutions, regardless of size or program success, that can lead to athletic fundraising success. The fundraisers' strategies centered around sharing student-athlete stories and focused on connecting them with their donor base, strategies which would also be applicable in the Division I or III environment (Gladden et al., 2005).

### **Theoretical Implications**

As limited research had been conducted examining athletic fundraising through a lens of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), this study makes a significant theoretical contribution by applying stakeholder theory to the athletic fundraising process, with findings demonstrating that stakeholder theory is an appropriate avenue

through which to analyze athletic fundraising, and not just at the Division II level. By examining the challenges and strategies in the Division II athletic fundraising environment, the beginnings of a conceptual understanding were established through identification of stakeholder theory claims (power, urgency, and legitimacy) mapped onto athletic department stakeholders.

Power, as argued by Mitchell et al. (1997), creates influence that a stakeholder has over an organization. In the athletic fundraising context at the Division II level (and Division I and Division III as well), donors are the stakeholder group that come to the forefront regarding power. In philanthropy, donors will be in a position of power given that they have the resources that the organization needs, which was reinforced through our findings. However, in Division II, where there is less focus on transactional-based giving, the athletic department and institution hold less power than they might at a larger Division I program. The findings of the current study also demonstrate, from a theoretical standpoint, that the claim of legitimacy is at the center of the athletic fundraising context. Fundraisers must develop legitimate claims with all stakeholders involved in order to boost credibility and develop trust with their constituents and colleagues.

Urgency factors into stakeholder theory when a relationship or situation is time-sensitive (Mitchell et al., 1997). Of the three claims to stakeholder theory, urgency was the most difficult to establish in the athletic fundraising setting. However, fundraisers often operate with a sense of urgency when there is a swift desire to see monies secured for a particular project. This urgency extends to the university and athletic department. For instance, with capital projects (new buildings, facility renovations, etc.) there is clear urgency because once construction is finished there could be less incentive for individuals to donate to a completed project. Therefore, the findings of the current study determined that the institution/university is the stakeholder with the greatest claim to urgency.

While some of the challenges and strategies are more relevant to Division II as illuminated above, the theoretical insights revolving around stakeholder management by fundraisers are applicable for Division I and III athletics fundraising as well as for broader academic fundraising at an institution.

### **Practical Implications**

There are challenges to athletic fundraising this study explored that are uncontrollable to the fundraiser, such as winning and university climate. However, the way in which they manage and build relationships with the various stakeholder groups has shown to be an effective strategy for enhancing athletic fundraising success. In particular, athletic fundraisers can develop stronger rapport with their coaches, who are stakeholders with great legitimacy. While many fundraisers develop strong relationships with their donors, there should also be a strong focus placed on the fundraiser-coach relationship. This will enable fundraisers to best identify program needs, which will allow for an easier matching of donors' interests.

It is important for athletic fundraisers, particularly those whose offices are in the athletic department or who do not report to anyone in the university foundation,

to develop consistent communications and meeting times with foundation staff. As was evidenced in the findings, there are a variety of resources that the foundation has at its disposal that can enhance an athletic fundraiser's ability to do their job. By partnering and collaborating with the foundation, instead of working in opposition, athletic fundraisers can identify and engage with additional donors, have more accurate donor information, and potentially even distribute some of the workload (e.g., gift processing and end-of-year gift receipts) which would be of benefit to small athletic fundraising staffs.

The managerial implications and suggestions derived from this study are relevant to athletic fundraisers across all NCAA divisions, not just Division II. Fundraisers across all levels face some similar challenges such as donor fatigue and a lack of fundraising resources. In addition, the concept of capitalizing on stakeholders, particularly those with legitimacy such as coaches and student-athletes, can be a viable fundraising strategy for Division I, II, and III.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

As with most research studies, there are limitations that need to be discussed. Given the small sample, the current study may not capture the entire breadth of challenges, strategies, and stakeholder influences in the Division II landscape. This study was also limited to the perspective of the athletic fundraiser, as input was not solicited from coaches, donors, or other university personnel. Because data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic fallout in higher education and intercollegiate athletics, additional studies could compare and analyze how the challenges and strategies have changed during the pandemic and in a post-COVID-19 atmosphere.

As a limitation of this study was its small sample size, a larger sample would help identify broad-based critical issues surrounding Division II athletic fundraising, and requisite strategies. Furthermore, six of the participants had less than three years of full-time fundraising experiencing. Future research could focus on those with more robust fundraising experience as they might be able to better attest to the challenges and strategies athletic fundraisers face. In addition, our study featured only three universities that did not sponsor football. Future studies could include a larger subset of non-football schools.

Similar studies could also be conducted at private institutions in Division II. This study focused on public institutions, but future research could be directed towards examining the landscape private schools face and comparing with public institutions. Future studies could also explore in greater detail the intersection of stakeholder theory with athletic fundraising. These studies could work to better establish the claims of power, urgency, and legitimacy for stakeholders involved in athletic fundraising.

As this study showed, stakeholder management is an essential part of successful athletic fundraising. Development officers must identify the various stakeholders of all claims (power, urgency, and legitimacy) and leverage them to their benefit. Fundraisers must do more than build relationships with whom they work. To

maximize their athletic department's potential from a fundraising standpoint, they must give priority to all competing stakeholder claims. By adopting stakeholder management practices when it comes to fundraising, athletic directors, coaches, and fundraisers can give their athletic department a competitive edge.

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