

# Industry-Academic Collaborations to Advance Sustainability

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The sport and entertainment (S&E) sectors continue their efforts to become more environmentally sustainable (McCullough, Pfahl, & Nguyen, 2016; Ponsford, 2011; Trendafilova & McCullough, 2018). These advancements have made organizations, venues, and events across both sectors more economically profitable, operationally efficient, and even provide opportunities to deepen their connection with customers, patrons, fans, and spectators (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Casper, Pfahl, & McCullough, 2017; McCullough & Cunningham, 2010; Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013). Undoubtedly the S&E sectors fall well short of fulfilling a completely environmentally sustainable ideal. Yet the initial efforts to strive for this ideal goal can be characterized as the waves of the ocean (see McCullough, Pfahl, & Nguyen, 2016). In other words, the organizational and situational challenges of environmental initiatives progress and recede like the ebbs and flows of waves. In the progression of environmental sustainability, S&E organizations make strides forward through individual or collective efforts, but can also recede or ebb, because of setbacks as S&E organizations learn from the outcomes of their efforts. As their efforts for environmental sustainability become more sophisticated and complex, they progress from the initial wave to subsequent waves.

Currently, there is growing momentum among leaders across both the S&E sectors to advance environmental sustainability efforts among organizations that have little to no environmental sustainability programs. This can be seen as another wave advancing the collective environmental sustainability movement within the S&E sectors. There has been an increased focus on environmental sustainability industry-specific organizations that serve as knowledge and information clearinghouses and centralized groups to organize and promote environmental sustainability (Trendafilova & McCullough, 2018). Such organizations in the S&E

sectors include the Green Sports Alliance (North America), Green Sports Alliance Japan, Sports Environmental Association (Austrasia), BASIS (United Kingdom), and Sport and Sustainability International (Europe), International Facility Management Association, International Association of Venue Managers, among others. Despite the existence of several leading S&E entities working together with sustainability experts, there are still S&E organizations in the initial phases, or waves, of their environmental sustainability efforts (McCullough et al., 2016).

Excellent examples exist of organizations, venues, and events that are leaders in environmental sustainability. Two examples of organizations that are considerably advanced in their environmental efforts are AEG Live and the National Hockey League with both having a strong leadership in this space (AEG, 2018; NHL, 2018). Both organizations release sustainability reports and propose new sustainability targets for the upcoming year. These organizations primarily focus on the environmental performance of facility operations (e.g., energy consumption, procurement, water usage, waste management). These entities are the exception rather than the norm; still the majority of S&E entities do not release sustainability reports, much less evaluate their sustainability initiatives. One of the biggest forces that result in major flows of the S&E sector are professional clearinghouse organizations that promote standards of practice and new techniques to advance environmental sustainability throughout the S&E sectors.

Commonly, the attendees of these practitioner-organization conferences are leaders of the respective venue/organization who are actively engaged in environmental sustainability. However, practitioners need more exposure on ways to integrate environmental sustainability into their daily operations and to integrate these aspects throughout the organization to include other key stakeholders with more decision-making power and in departments that will more deeply integrate environmental sustainability values into the organizational fabric. For instance, the first sport and environmental sustainability organization, Green Sports Alliance, repetitive topics from year to year. These repetitive discussions continue because there is no consensus among practitioners or a dearth of research by academics that have been conducted on these topics. In turn, this repetitiveness prevents the advanced understanding and collective knowledge of the integration of environmental sustainability in the S&E sectors (Trendafilova & McCullough, 2018).

To this end, the purpose of this article is to stress the importance and the need for academics and practitioners to work together and the value that this collaboration can have to advance sustainability efforts in the S&E sectors. A deep collaborative environment serves a tremendous opportunity to further establish environmental sustainability as a worthwhile and standalone area of research in the S&E academics. Academic theoretical frameworks, current understanding

of the respective business sectors from empirical research, and previous collaborations with the industry should be leveraged to address the issues of environmental sustainability in the S&E sectors, in general, but more specifically how these business sectors can do their part to address the concerns of climate change and fulfill the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement (Sartore-Baldwin, McCullough, & Quatman-Yates, 2017; Sartore-Baldwin & McCullough, 2018; United Nations, 2017).

## **Professional Collaboration**

The idea of increased collaboration between practitioners and academics is not new but is crucial considering the dire circumstances and consequences surrounding climate change and the lack of empirical research in the S&E sectors on the topic (Kates et al., 2001). We draw from our professional research backgrounds, examining the integration and advancement of environmental sustainability in those two sectors. Further, our basis for discussion is our professional experiences and efforts to collaborate with S&E practitioners and the rapid review of the literature examining the practitioner discussion topics facilitated by the Green Sports Alliance and academic research in sport management (Trendafilova & McCullough, 2018). This line of thought follows the concept of diffusion of innovation concerning the depth of environmental sustainability initiatives within the S&E sectors as introduced by McCullough and colleagues (2016).

Diffusion of innovation is the communication and dissemination of a new idea or concept that advances practice or thought in a specific social system (McCullough et al., 2016; Rogers, 2003). This process explains aspects of organizational learning to confirm or reform organizational behavior and isomorphic adoption of standard operating procedures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). That is to say, social circles of academics or practitioners will discuss issues relevant to their respective social circles and the conversations and proposed solutions become more similar over time across the respective sector. While these discussions allow for the dissemination of information and even new organizational practices, such as a research topic (e.g., integrating environmental sustainability into the S&E sectors), or organizational practice (e.g., optimized waste management operations, interventions to promote sustainable behaviors among spectators), the conversation can produce circular arguments and stagnate progress towards environmental sustainability.

While new ideas or concepts may advance the S&E sectors approach to environmental sustainability, rarely do organizations adapt these innovations to the unique aspects of their organization. Rather, these practices may be simply seen as 'plug and play' practices that do not require adaptation. This approach, however, is taken because of the credibility and legitimization of the initiative (McCullough,

Trendafilova, & Picariello, 2016) and not for optimizing organizational outcomes (Dacin, 1997). Further, closed social circles can become further isolated from other perspectives or ideas that may advance practice. In effect, these social circles create whirlpools that are hard to escape, breakaway, and discover new avenues of organizational learning that lead to new organizational practices (e.g., outside collaboration; McCullough & Cunningham, 2010). This internal dialogue becomes an engrained organizational culture and it is hard to break away from this to promote new ways of operating (Wood, 1991). Thus, it is important to examine the current discussions within and without of the silos of academia and industry practice seeking to advance the environmental sustainability movement in S&E in order to understand how these two sectors can collaborate to further advance and ultimately achieve environmental sustainability.

## **Gaps in Knowledge and Discussions**

In their recent rapid review of academic literature, Trendafilova and McCullough (2018) found that there are gaps between the focus of academic inquiry involving sustainability in the S&E literature and the points of discussion conducted by the leading sport sustainability practitioner group, the Green Sports Alliance. These gaps are concerning, because it shows a clear disconnect between the research pursuits of academics and the designated importance placed on specific issues by practitioners. Both groups are valued in the pursuit of environmental sustainability, thus it is important to examine the primary areas of importance of each group, identify the differences to recognize gaps, and distinguish similarities to propose initial areas of collaboration.

**Academic focus.** From an academic standpoint, research primarily focuses on managerial strategies and decision-making, spectator sustainability behaviors, facilities, and marketing/communications. In the area of managerial strategies and decision-making, scholarship emphasizes the importance of examining the negative impact of organizational business practices on the environment and determining specific objectives to mitigate or eliminate such negative impact. After identifying the objectives, it is important to understand the variety of organizational resources needed to align the overall organizational strategies with the specific environmental sustainability objectives. In the area of spectator engagement in sustainability practices, sport fans have the expectation that athletic departments have an action plan to engage in sustainability initiatives. Although fans, in general, are eager to participate in sustainability practices at sport venues, they are less likely to transfer such behaviors at home (Casper, Pfahl, & McCullough, 2014). Sport venues are partially supported by the financial contributions of donors, and interestingly research has indicated that having sustainability efforts communicated well through promotional and

educational message has the potential to increase social and financial support of donors. The key here is to understand that sport is a large platform for social change and can be utilized for the promotion of environmentally sustainable behaviors (Authors, 2018).

A related topic is green facilities and the benefits facility owners receive when adopting sustainable facility design. Such benefits not only increase public awareness of environmental stewardship but also have a more tangible component (e.g., economic savings). A critical factor for being successful in sustainability efforts and in increasing environmental awareness is communication and how sustainability efforts are disseminated to the public. Scholarship has pointed out the importance of communicating all efforts regardless of their level of importance (e.g., recycling vs. solar panels). It is human nature for sport spectators to be curious, and the manner in which sustainability efforts are communicated could affect the organization's public consumption of the sport product it offers, and in turn, the public attitude toward the organization.

Although academic research indicates that several areas relate to environmental sustainability studied by scholars in the field of sport management, but other areas exist in which research is rather scarce. For example, scholarship is limited to performance and does not incorporate measurement. This is somewhat illogical for one to evaluate performance without a measurement system in place. Furthermore, it leads to the question of how accurate and representative the performance evaluation is when measuring metrics are lacking. Another area of need is social sustainability, which focuses on the impact of sport events on the local communities. More specifically, issues linked to infrastructure development, natural resources protection, and cultural heritage.

In summary, based on the rapid review of literature conducted by Trendafilova and McCullough (2018), and from an academic perspective, it is encouraging to see that scholars have recognized the importance of addressing environmental sustainability in the realm of sport. However, there are still gaps in knowledge related to sustainable sport management (see also Mallen, 2017). For example, in the area of managerial decision-making, more work is needed to address partnerships and international collaborations. This means partnerships at all levels, starting at the local and expanding to regional and national levels. For organizations with limited resources, having local partnerships could assist not only in sustainability efforts but also strengthen the ties with the local community. Another area that needs more attention is facility renovation and maintenance. It is much easier to incorporate a green design into a brand new sport facility than to achieve the same level of sustainability within an existing facility. In both instances, how maintenance is planned and managed can make a difference in minimizing the negative impact on the environment.

S&E sectors focus. While academic research is typically conducted in loose collaboration with industry professionals, the results of this applied research may not be directly translated into improving industry practice. Conversely, practitioner clearinghouse organizations, like the Green Sports Alliance, host regularly scheduled webinars, regional conferences, and annual national conferences to discuss current standards of practice, to promote new products and strategies, and serve as networking opportunities to forward collaboration among stakeholder groups. However, because the dissemination of knowledge through the S&E sectors varies drastically, the topics of discussion at these conferences seem repetitive (McCullough et al., 2016). That is, S&E organizations and venues have varying commitments to environmental sustainability and are in different stages of integrating environmental sustainability initiatives into their organization and venue; thus, practitioner conferences topics are repetitive to appeal to organizations at all levels of commitment.

Trendafilova and McCullough (2018) found that the Green Sports Alliance primarily focused on topics involving seven different areas: performance/evaluation, marketing/communication, fan engagement/behaviors, procurement, facility management, managerial decision-making, and social sustainability across all their monthly webinars, regional conferences, and annual summits. Understandably so, performance and evaluation topics were widely discussed as part of the overall Green Sports Alliance programs. These initiatives focus on ways to baseline, objectively evaluate, and seek certification for various facility related environmental sustainability initiatives (e.g., LEED, Energy Star). Marketing and communication topics focused on reporting efforts and ways to leverage publicity to highlight organization/venue environmental sustainability initiatives. While fan engagement is more broadly defined than sport marketing literature, fan engagement campaigns are widely used to promote environmental sustainability initiatives (McCullough, in press; Casper, Pfahl, & McCullough, 2014, 2017). However, these sessions focus on fan engagement and behaviors and are one-directional communications from the sport organization to encourage patrons to engage in environmentally sustainable behaviors (e.g., recycle, compost). Also, one-off events like green games are highlighted to promote sustainable behaviors. These fan engagement discussions primarily focus on raising awareness of the organization's efforts towards environmental sustainability.

Further, procurement sessions begin to introduce the importance of evaluating the sources and production of the organization/venue's supply chain. Typically, the goal of these sessions is to convey the basic understanding of the carbon footprint of the supply chain and raising awareness of the sourcing and basic tenets of the circular economy. Evaluating the carbon emissions or environmental footprint of an event takes considerable human resources to properly con-

duct. However, identifying these externalities can be beneficial in developing a strategic plan. Additionally, discussions surrounding facility management focus on ways to improve existing facilities. As previously mentioned, it may be easier, although more seldom, to integrate environmental sustainability performance of a new facility and how it is more difficult to implement in existing facilities. The speakers on these topics highlight quick improvements to facilities that can have quick returns on investment and meaningful improvements to the organization's environmental sustainability goals (e.g., reduced energy consumption). Lastly, managerial decision-making topics frequently focused on securing internal buy-in to such efforts. These internal organizational environment talks quickly incorporate concepts of organizational culture, leadership, and change management, which could be further supported from an academic perspective.

The Green Sports Alliance and other practitioner environmental sustainability clearinghouse organizations serve an important role in the advancement of environmental sustainability in the S&E sectors. These organizations certainly advance these efforts and can oftentimes be hindered by the response of the S&E organizations, which the clearinghouse organization serve. Thus, as the commitment of the entire S&E sector fluctuates and varies across individual S&E organizations, topics will have to be repetitive.

When attending these various events, whether online or in person, it becomes apparent that there are organizations at different stages (i.e., waves) in their organization's journey to be environmentally sustainable. Also, absent from these regular presentations and collaborative efforts are academics with expertise in these areas. While not entrenched on the front lines of the practical application of the integration of sustainability in the S&E sectors, academics can lend a different perspective to the overall conversation. Likewise, practitioners can assist academics with exposure to practical settings rather than having research conducted in a vacuum, disconnected from practice. This collaboration can lead to the advancement of applied research and the ultimate goal of creating even better campaigns that make the S&E sectors more successful in their environmentally sustainable efforts.

## **Benefits of Increased Academic-Practitioner Collaboration**

There are multiple benefits of academicians and practitioners collaborating which have been promulgated across all disciplines including S&E. Although scholarly work primarily has been theoretically grounded, scholars have also provided some practical suggestions. For example, when an organization is rather small with limited financial and human resources, environmentally sustainable initiatives could still be successfully adopted if local stakeholders are involved. This, in turn, makes the relationship beneficial to both sides

and instills a closer relationship with the local community and makes everyone even more invested in the sustainability movement. On the other hand, organizations are a great source for providing academicians with data they have collected either as a baseline or over a certain period, thus allowing scholars to advance research. Conversely, academicians can also help increase the rigor and validity of practitioner data collection, increasing the robustness of the data collected by the organization. Through deeper collaboration, new research outcomes could be tested within the organizational environment and use the organization as a testing laboratory to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of proposed environmental programs. This cycle could be repeated indefinitely, enhancing the benefits for both practitioners and scholars.

The challenge with such sophistication is how hard the organization works to implement a better strategy when it comes to sustainability efforts. It is well known that entities operate with the main goal of having a financial success and often environmental programs are pushed back due to limited financial resources and the uncertainty of the long-term financial benefits (Sport Business Journal, 2016). However, strategic planning based on a holistic approach could be the solution. For example, the organization could form a green team and utilize the knowledge of employees from various units, thus saving on hiring an external consultant or using consulting agencies. This internal team can produce more objective results than an external agency that may not be as familiar with the organizational culture or the specifics of operations. Furthermore, when possible, organizations could work with the local university (universities) to utilize the knowledge and expertise of faculty conducting research in related areas (e.g., natural resource management, ecological assessment, solid waste management). This also could prove to be more cost-effective than dependence on consultancy. Nevertheless, the general attitude among S&E organizations that do not seek collaborations because they do not want to share internal data must be overcome. Academicians should take it upon themselves to reach out to practitioners and slowly build trust through small collective projects. Trust building and orienting practitioners to establish methodologies and analysis are critical foundations.

To this end, scholars could acquire several benefits as well if a solid collaboration with practitioners is in place. For example, if S&E entities supply data they have collected, research can not only benefit by providing more meaningful findings but also by expanding the scope of contexts results could be applied to (e.g., conference centers, professional sports, recreational and leisure activities, sport tourism, local, regional and international S&E events). Consequently, the wide range of settings would allow for a better generalizability of findings for furthering the impact of research. Furthermore, a collaboration between academicians and practitioners might make funding agencies look more favorably at supporting sustainable research.

S&E academics do not fully leverage the benefits of interdisciplinary research. Perhaps academics get caught up in the publish or perish culture, but more external collaboration is needed to break down the silos within our discipline and enrich the collective body of research. Interdisciplinary research is especially needed as academics and practitioners alike address the issues surrounding climate change (Kates et al., 2001). This same sentiment is appropriate to S&E academicians concerning applied research. In particular, sport management scholars lack connections to S&E organizations, and as a result, work in a vacuum. Conversely, S&E organizations do not fully realize these mentioned benefits, and others, of collaborations with higher education institutions (e.g., using faculty knowledge, providing internship opportunities for students who already have knowledge about environmental sustainability). Both sides need to realize their limitations and opportunities to leverage the resources around their organization and to accept a mentality that collective action leads to success when combating climate change and achieving environmental sustainability.

## **Recommendations to Bolster Academic-Practitioner Collaborations**

There is clearly a win-win-win relationship that can be established among practitioners and academicians to protect and preserve the natural environment. Any form of collaboration requires time, negotiation, and concessions, and time is necessary to build trust among both parties. Clearly outlining one's intentions and desired outcomes are important in this process. From our own experience, these relationships can take years to build trust. Even after an initial foundation of trust is established, finding the right project to make the initial leap into a collaborative project takes time to identify. Once this project is identified then the negotiation of the scope and depth of the project takes place. S&E academicians should also be ready to concede some benefits in the effort to build trust. Such a concession may involve an agreement to refrain from publishing on the data for a specific period of time, or not to publish from the data collection. Likewise, practitioners need to acclimate themselves to the academic process to allow for certain requests of researchers (e.g., multiple item constructs, access to email databases, longitudinal studies, etc.). These initial efforts if conducted successfully can lead to further collaboration and data sharing across practitioner and academic circles because of the mutual benefits established in the collaborative relationship.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that drastic action must be taken to combat the adverse effects climate change has and will have on our planet. Everyone's way of life is likely to be impacted because of

climate change, including our enjoyment of sport and entertainment consumption. S&E sectors are in a unique position to advance the calls in the Paris Climate Agreement and subsequent efforts of the United Nations to engage other business sectors (i.e., sport; United Nations, 2017). To produce meaningful results that reduce the human impact on the natural environment particularly related to the S&E sectors, more collaboration is necessary in practitioner and academician circles. These collaborations can be mutually beneficial to each group, but also tremendously helpful in combating the effect of climate change. Further efforts are needed to build trust and to disseminate information between these groups to advance the collective body of knowledge and improve the sectors' practice concerning environmental sustainability.

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