

# Study examines why people stop donating to college athletics

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As lawmakers and others debate whether and how college athletes should be paid and coaches' salaries and facilities arms races come into focus, fundraising is drawing renewed interest. Yet no one seems to be considering one source of athletic funding: Donors who no longer make contributions.

Understanding the motivations of why athletic donors give and especially why they decide to stop giving can be critical as college athletics funding models evolve, University of Kansas authors argue in a new study.

Jordan Bass, assistant professor of health, sport and exercise science, co-authored a study with Rebecca Achen, KU doctoral student, and Brian Gordon of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The study was published in *Applied Research in Coaching and Athletics Annual*. The researchers surveyed more than 50 people who had donated \$1,200 or less to the athletic department at a major Southern university, then stopped giving.

"It could be something small like they just forgot or didn't get a renewal notice," Bass said. "Or, in other cases, they were unhappy or couldn't afford it. They may not have been big individual donations, but for these organizations, they can add up to a lot. I think we'll see more emphasis on fundraising for athletics as time goes on."

Major programs with multimillion annual budgets might not consider the \$500,000 or \$2 million from small donors a significant part of the budget, but it could likely become more important. The so-called "Power

5" conferences are currently looking at increasing athletic scholarships to cover "full cost of attendance," which would require paying for more than tuition, books and housing. Several institutions have already said such a move could add several million dollars to their budgets annually. That's a multimillion line item in the budget that wasn't there previously, Bass said, that athletic departments would need to fund.

Therefore, fundraising could be key. And understanding donors' motivations can be vital in successfully raising funds. While numerous studies have addressed the topic, virtually none have examined why people decide to stop giving. Working to encourage people to renew donations can be more efficient, as research has repeatedly shown that it is not only cheaper to re-attract customers, but the chances of success are much higher for numerous reasons, chief among them not needing to explain your product or services, Bass said.

Non-renewing donors in the survey were asked about their original motivations for giving, what they liked most about being a booster and why they discontinued. Sports fans are by nature passionate, and the researchers expected to find people gave to show their affiliation with the school and to obtain good tickets to games. But, in fact, their motivations were different: supporting or "giving back" to the school; giving because of a bond with the institution and athletic department; benefits associated with being a booster and giving because donors had children attending the school were the most prominent [motivations](#).

Benefits of giving, from touring facilities to something as simple as receiving a branded license plate frame, were the most cited reasons people liked giving. They also discussed the positive feeling of helping and being affiliated with the university as top benefits.

Financial reasons were most commonly cited as reasons that donors quit giving. Some said they could not afford to give more or were living on

fixed incomes after retirement. While the cost of membership in a booster club wasn't cited, respondents said it was an ancillary expense they found easier to cut when their own financial situations changed. Respondents commonly said they wished they could continue giving, but they simply couldn't afford it.

Others mentioned they lost a connection with the university. Some said when their child graduated or left school, they no longer felt a reason to donate. Perhaps more troubling for the athletic departments, many donors felt the institutions didn't care about the donors, only the donations.

"I have been shown that my love is only as deep as my pockets," one respondent wrote.

The results show that, while it's not likely possible to win back every [donor](#), often the reasons for stopping donations are small and can be overcome.

"At that donor level it could be something as simple as just making it easy for people to renew, by clicking a link in an email or working out an installment plan if people can't make a one-time payment," Bass said. "I would argue there are simple things athletic departments can do to get donors back, and if they're done well, it's not an insignificant amount of money."

The researchers focused on donations less than \$1,200 because donors who give large amounts naturally receive more attention, so departments often know why the contributions stopped, then work to bring them back. But as budget pictures change, what can sometimes be considered "found money" will likely become more important. And for smaller schools, with much smaller budgets, winning back lapsed donors can be even more crucial. The results of the study can lay the groundwork for

creating effective "winback" strategies for donors, the authors wrote.

"We saw that, as an organization, you need to make it seem important to people that they give, and you need to make it easy to give by taking down as many barriers to donating as possible," Bass said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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