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Interview With John Humenik, Executive Director of the College Sports Information Directors of America

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John Humenik is the executive director of the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA). Humenik has more than 30 years of experience in athletic communications, including stints as the sports information director at Princeton, Michigan, and Florida. Before assuming the new position with CoSIDA, Humenik was a senior manager for Sports Publishing LLC, a publisher of sports-related books. Humenik is already a member of the CoSIDA Hall of Fame, and he received the organization's highest honor for professional accomplishment, the Arch Ward Award, in 1994. Established in 1957, CoSIDA has more than 2,300 members, most of whom work in college athletics public relations positions.

Stoldt: You are CoSIDA's first-ever executive director. What factors led the organization to create this position?

Humenik: Until my recent appointment in March, the organization has relied solely on volunteer committee services to administer day-to-day operations, including oversight of an annual convention. The membership decided at the 2007 convention that the scope of the total responsibilities and time requirements being demanded should now be handled with more full-time oversight. Administering an organization that has grown this large and diverse reached a point where there simply had to be more day-to-day oversight, as well as providing broader and more strategic leadership in dealing with the issues facing not only our large, diverse organization but also the general issues and challenges facing sports public relations, media relations, and communications.

Stoldt: On your hiring in March, you indicated that one of your first priorities was to work with other CoSIDA leaders to develop a strategic plan for the organization. At this stage in your work, what is your evaluation of the current standing of the organization and the profession?

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Humenik: I felt that this was clearly the first step I needed to get into place simply due to the fact that the morale of the sports communications profession is quite low. We need a focused effort and plan. Excessive amounts of work that routinely lead to 70-plus-hour weeks, the 24/7 news cycle, and the growing misunderstanding of our role and value among senior management at the college level led me to firmly believe, and the leadership of CoSIDA agreed, that we simply had to put such a plan into place.

We can no longer just talk about these things; we have to have a well-thought-out plan to proactively approach them. We felt if we did that, the plan alone would greatly aid in improving morale. The organization's first-ever strategic plan was approved by the board of directors in early June, and then the membership approved it at our annual convention in Tampa in early July.

As we put this strategic-initiatives plan together we were cognizant that it had to achieve multiple things, and we organized/focused the initiatives plan around what we refer to as our seven core strategic guiding focus principles. All of our decisions should be influenced by our desire to (a) advance the professional, (b) advance the profession, (c) advance our professional society and organization, (d) image build and image enhance ourselves within the college community, (e) image build and image enhance ourselves within our own professional society, (f) significantly raise our visibility within the college community, and (g) make sure that our decisions positively support aspects of the strategic plan. We feel that this approach will help us better focus on the issues and opportunities before us and make sure that all decisions are based on positively supporting the strategic plan. That has not necessarily been the case in a consistent manner in the past, and it has led to a lack of a clear focus on what our points of emphasis should be.

Stoldt: What have you and other CoSIDA leaders identified as the strategic priorities for the organization?

Humenik: We have determined that over the course of the next 3–5 years we want to focus on the following goals and put strategic tactics and objectives into place to help us monitor and make progress. In no particular order, our strategic initiatives are to

- Conduct a thorough evaluation and analysis of the organization's management structure and its committees and advisory support structure to determine where it can become more organized, efficient, effective, proactive, and service oriented, as well as to better ensure that we are in a positive position to carry out the organization's comprehensive strategic master plan and the yearly plans.
- Develop a comprehensive, strategic-based marketing plan for the benefit of the organization, profession, and its professionals.
- Elevate and enhance the organization's and profession's overall standing and image in the college athletics community.
- Improve the self-image of the profession, its professionals, and the organization.

- Consistently and diligently concentrate on all aspects of career and professional development.
- Seek to identify and develop methods of evaluation and analysis that will enable the profession to more effectively establish its role in the college athletics community. This process would include finding and developing ideas and concepts that will enable it to better quantify its value.
- Establish an efficient communications plan and network that will enable the organization's leadership to effectively and productively communicate with various and diverse constituencies, both internally and externally, on a consistent basis.
- Increase revenue generation and fund-raising capabilities.
- Establish and increase visibility, in addition to building effective partnerships and affiliations, in the college athletics community.
- Fully embrace the importance of the annual convention and workshop to support multiple aspects of the strategic plan.

Stoldt: You advocate an evolution in the role of college athletic media relations professionals from that of “information directors” to “strategic communication directors.” What will such a change mean for the profession?

Humenik: This is one of those things that have to take place in order for the college athletics community to fully appreciate our professional society and membership, the role they play, and the value they offer. In today's collegiate world, and for that matter throughout all areas of PR in our country, the title “information director” seems to primarily refer to a person who is involved mostly in keeping stats, preparing basic news releases, working on publications, setting up interviews, and managing the press box. The title “communications director,” however, seems to clearly project a person who has broader, more global duties and who is viewed more in a strategic and visionary capacity. As one person said to me at our recent convention in Tampa, one title paints a picture of a mechanic and the other an architect. There simply is more “value” in how others view a person who is an architect and has strategic capacity and interests.

Stoldt: Can you point to examples of organizations, either in college athletics or in other sport settings, that are particularly effective in their strategic communication initiatives? What can members of CoSIDA and others in the field learn from them?

Humenik: I think the NFL is outstanding in this regard, and has been for quite some time, going all the way back to when Commissioner Pete Rozelle, who began his career as a sports information director at the University of San Francisco and then was the PR director for the Los Angeles Rams, made proactive PR and communications-based strategic thinking an important part of the NFL. I've also been impressed with how the NCAA over the past few years has remade itself from a PR standpoint into an organization that is much more proactive and strategic in its thinking and approach to a variety of topics

and matters. This approach in their communications sector has clearly helped change the perception of the NCAA throughout much of college athletics. To me, both demonstrate that if you have clear proactive plan and vision and focus your decision making on it, you can make significant progress with regard to your goals and ambitions.

I would also like to say that, personally, my views and commitment to this “strategic thinking approach” have been positively enhanced by my experiences serving as chair of CoSIDA’s Academic All-America program in the 1980s. In the early part of that decade we received a \$10,000 grant from the NCAA to carry out and execute this wonderful program that honors joint excellence and achievement in academics and athletics. Our committee simply felt that this program could and should be elevated to a much higher public profile. We put into place a plan to build this program, and by the middle of that decade we had secured a marketing firm to represent us, which led to a corporate partnership with GTE (now Verizon) and several million dollars of marketing support going into the advancement of the program on a yearly basis. ESPN has now taken over as our corporate partner for the program.

Stoldt: If the advances you advocate are to be realized, many sport managers other than public relations specialists are going to have to change the way they think about organizational communication. What must happen to influence those key decision makers?

Humenik: It is my sense that most decision makers want, and in many cases are now demanding, their communications staff to go about their jobs in a different way, a more strategic way. If the senior staff is more “old school” in their approach to PR and communications, then I feel it is up to the communications staff to be proactive and clearly demonstrate what has to take place in the current state of communications for the athletics department to be successful. If either group (senior management staff or communications staff) or both groups sit on the sidelines with regard to this issue of changing from being “information directors” to “strategic communicators,” they will be left behind in a host of matters as they relate to college sports. We have to understand that we not only have to change the way we see ourselves—changing from information directors to communication directors to strategic communications directors—but also have to teach senior leadership; that is how they have to see us and our role within their organizations. This just is not about us but about changing the culture of how people in sports PR and communications need to be viewed and evaluated. Our leadership believes that the communications-based evolution we are living through provides us with a great opportunity to do just that.

Stoldt: In summer 2007, Myles Brand, president of the NCAA, attended the CoSIDA workshop and encouraged the membership to address audiences and influence opinions not only among the media and general public but also in their own academic institutions. How viable is that charge given the multiple demands already placed on athletic media relations professionals?

Humenik: If this is something that the president and athletics director at a given school want and demand, then it needs to get done. We have to adapt to what our leaders consider necessary and express as priorities. The way I view it is that such opportunities provide sports communications people a positive way to demonstrate the role they can play for the university at large.

Stoldt: One of the challenges of leading an organization as large as CoSIDA is that its members range from those at bowl championship series institutions with relatively large staffs and department budgets to an individual at a smaller institution who may have to serve as a one-person sports information office with other administrative or coaching responsibilities, too. How can you best address and serve such a diverse membership?

Humenik: We are in the process, as part of the strategic plan initiative, of coming up with a management structure that is more federated in nature. We are a very diverse organization, and the types of issues, challenges, and resources are dramatically different in the various groups that are under our umbrella. We are in the process of developing something along the lines of a management advisory committee or council for like-minded schools with similar situations, and then we want to encourage and empower them to specifically deal with issues and challenges instead of relying on an all-encompassing board to make decisions for everyone on everything. The NCAA was in much this same situation in the 1980s, with a large and diverse membership group, and the move to this federated approach in that large and diverse group has been well received and is clearly more effective and efficient. I believe we can make this same type of transition and that it will enable us to become more effective and efficient in a variety of ways. This concept has other benefits, as well, as it will get more people involved and engaged and develop more leaders.

Stoldt: New communications technology has changed the ways members of the media cover sport and has given fans new public platforms to share information, misinformation, and opinions. How is this affecting the work of CoSIDA members and other public relations professionals?

Humenik: Things that once took hours now take minutes, but at the same time there are so many more demands on the communication staff's time—multiple media-based interest and growth; recruiting, fund-raising, marketing, and fan-based support aspects of the job; and the time-consuming aspects of Web-site management. Time management is complicated further by the demands of a 24/7 news cycle and all the constituencies that must have everything done immediately. However, there are opportunities now to reach your fan and alumni base in a direct manner that did not exist 15 years ago. Personally I think it is exciting for our industry and profession to be right in the middle of the greatest communications evolution in history. There is no question that “managing” all of this is much more complicated than it used to be. However, as I indicated, this situation provides us with a meaningful opportunity to become leaders and architects in these discussions instead of mechanics and to thus demonstrate value and the impact of strategic thinking.

Stoldt: Like many other settings in sport, college athletics is becoming increasingly globalized. How do you anticipate that trend affecting the work of CoSIDA members in the near future?

Humenik: Like many things dealing with this communications evolution we are experiencing, you have to evolve with it and embrace it. Those who do will be energized by it, and those who don't will continue to have a difficult time grasping the importance of the need for thinking bigger, broader, and strategically. In short, as we hear many people say nowadays, it is what it is!

We have no choice but to embrace this development and seek to use it to demonstrate our value. For a decade now, there has been an escalating trend to get things done quicker and faster to meet the needs of the public and media who demand that. There is no reason to think that that is going to change. Communications directors are at the very point of confluence in all that is taking place in college athletics with regard to the communications evolution, and they will continue to be. There will be a growing need for people in our business and industry who like that challenge.

Stoldt: You have said that in order for CoSIDA to evolve, it must reach out beyond the organization to former media relations professionals working in other sport management positions and other leaders in college athletics. What roles might academics with interests in sport communication play in advancing the profession?

Humenik: It plays a huge role in helping the next generation of folks interested in careers in college sports management and sports communications to understand the need to become architects rather than mechanics. Far too many people, in the eyes of communications directors, are currently coming out of sports administration and sports communications programs without enough understanding and appreciation of the value of communications, public and media relations, and the increased need for "strategic communications." The academic communities could—and must from our standpoint—play a significant role in helping us on the communications front lines demonstrate value and help transform how others involved in the enterprise of college sports understand and value this role and responsibility. It is not enough, from our perspective, that the importance of this be taught just to folks interested in careers in sports communication. It must, perhaps even more important, be taught to the folks who are interested in becoming senior-level leaders like athletics directors.

Stoldt: Aside from the subject matter commonly taught in sport management and mass communication programs, what topics or issues should educators be addressing as they prepare students for careers in sport public relations?

Humenik: From our standpoint, courses and presentations that would help interested parties in all aspects of sports management better understand the need for strategic thinking and planning as it relates to communications, PR, and media relations would be a big plus. Everyone in sports management should

be taught about the role of these functions and the value they offer. From a communications director's standpoint too many of these programs—especially those in sports management and sports administration—just touch on communications. In addition, I think anything that can be taught that will help people who want to get into sports communications develop ways to “define value” in the context of the college athletics enterprise would be a huge advancement for those of us in this industry.