

College Football Revival: Analyzing a Commuter School's Marketing Efforts and How They Impact Key Stakeholders

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Introduction

Stakeholder theory takes into account the influence that various stakeholders can have on an organization's operations and suggests that understanding and accounting for stakeholder needs is vital for long-term success (Hester, Bradley, & Adams, 2012; Morehead, Shapiro, Madden, Reams, & McEvoy, 2017). Collegiate athletics can be examined through the lens of stakeholder theory, where athletic departments use sport to create a sense of community (SOC) amongst their various stakeholder groups (Covell, 2004). However, the decision-making process for addressing these stakeholders' needs is often a complex one for administrators (Morehead et al., 2017; Putler & Wolfe, 1999).

In recent years, many universities have turned to football as an effective way to facilitate SOC at the university (Kelly & Dixon, 2011). This has become especially common at "commuter schools" where the majority of the students do not live on campus. Wiseman, Gonzales, and Salyer (2004) found the more involved students were on campus, the higher their SOC. Commuter students are typically less involved on campus and thus are less likely to feel a sense of belonging or to identify with the university (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). This challenge is something administrators must look to address, especially at schools where commuter students make up the majority of attendees.

Universities lean heavily on their alumni for donations and recent trends have seen the number of smaller donations made specifically by younger alumni taper off in recent years (Scutari, 2017). Studies have shown that the stronger identification and involvement a student has with their university, the more likely they are to donate and to do so continually (McDearmon 2010; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). The prestige of a university is also shown to have an effect on the willingness to donate, and more so amongst recent graduates (Holmes, 2009). Many schools have added football because they view it as a way to increase their school's image and prestige (Kelly & Dixon, 2011), and to increase donations from alumni (Tucker, 2004).

The following case study examines the influence of a recently revived football program and a newly constructed on-campus football stadium on two primary stakeholders at a mid-major commuter school in the southeast United States. This case study sought to identify stakeholder differences between alumni and students in the following areas: identification with the university and its football program; game day experience; and influence of an on-campus football stadium on game attendance.

Methodology

Participants in the study included 210 current students and 141 alumni (N = 351) of a mid-major size commuter university in the Southeast United States that revived its football program three years earlier and was playing its inaugural season in a newly constructed on-campus stadium. Permission was granted by the athletics department to collect data onsite prior to home football games and the survey was completed electronically using mobile iPad devices administered by trained assistants outside the stadium. Instrument items were adapted from prior studies to

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measure six spectator-related elements including: three elements related to spectator identification with the university and its football program (Wann & Branscombe, 1993); two elements related to game day experience (Brady & Cronin, 2001); and one item used to measure the new stadium's influence on game attendance (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002).

Analysis and Results

Stakeholder assessments of the six spectator-related elements were as follows (students/alumni): "I feel more connected to the University because of [team] football" (M = 4.12, SD = 0.99/M = 4.45, SD = 0.84); "I feel a connection with others who follow [team] football" (M = 4.11, SD = 0.94/M = 4.50, SD = 0.79); "I identify myself as a loyal fan of the [team] football program" (M = 4.29, SD = 0.88/M = 4.53, SD = 0.75); "My game day experience in attending [team] football games has exceeded my expectations" (M = 3.95, SD = 1.06/M = 4.43, SD = 0.76); "My experience with the tailgating atmosphere has exceeded my expectations" (M = 3.93, SD = 1.10/M = 4.39, SD = 0.86); "Bringing the football stadium on campus will increase my attendance at [team] home games" (M = 4.36, SD = 0.90/M = 4.65, SD = 0.65). Group analysis was then performed using a set of six t-tests and results showed that statistically significant differences existed, at the .05 level, between how students and alumni assessed all six of the spectator-related elements.

Discussion and Implications

Identifying and addressing the needs of stakeholders is of the utmost importance for an organization's viability (Morehead et al., 2017). Stakeholders are not only affected by the organization's decisions, but they themselves can influence policy, marketing strategies, and other aspects of the organization (Covell, 2004). Organizations must use care not to satisfy one group of stakeholders at the expense of another (Putler & Wolfe, 1999). In the case study presented here, findings show that alumni identified more closely with the university and its football program, that the administration exceeded game day expectation of alumni significantly more than students, and that the new on-campus stadium had a greater impact on home attendance for alumni than for students.

As discussed, an alumni's sense of belonging to the university can directly impact their decision to support the program by attending games and making financial donations. (McDearmon, 2010; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). Our results suggest that students feel significantly less connected to the university than school alumni. While overall student attendance at college football games has been declining (Bonesteel, 2008), game attendance at commuter schools is oftentimes even less (Newbold et al., 2011). These schools run the risk of further alienating current students who could become future supporters of the program. To address this challenge, athletic departments should look to tailor their game day and marketing plans to also fulfill the needs of students. This can be done various in ways including the promotion of ancillary events like concerts, pep rallies, or other student-oriented events that can make students feel more prioritized.

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