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Abstract

All across college campuses, dozens of intercollegiate sports teams compete each year. It is assumed that attendance will vary across these sports for a number of factors. However, the impact of one organizationally controlled factor (choosing to ticket the event or not) has not been explored in the literature. In this study, the authors examined the ticketing practices of intercollegiate athletics departments. A qualitative interview approach was utilized to explore the importance and implications of ticketing practices of intercollegiate athletics departments. Terms such as reputation, legitimacy, and value were used to describe the reasoning behind whether or not to charge attendees at sporting events.

Keywords: *Ticketing policies, nonrevenue sports, intercollegiate athletics, qualitative, legitimacy, attendance, reputation, finance, sales*

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In 2016, the University of Cincinnati instituted a ticketing policy unique among its NCAA Division I peers. Administrators started an initiative known as Experience UC, which offers the general public complimentary admission to all athletics events except for football, men's basketball, and baseball home events (Cincinnati Athletics, 2015). The Experience UC initiative aims to address low attendance numbers reported over the years by creating a "user-friendly community outreach program" that encourages individuals to visit campus and support the athletics teams (Cincinnati Athletics 2015, para. 3). The low attendance numbers are not unique to the University of Cincinnati. In fact, universities nationwide are experiencing declines in attendance for most athletics events (Soffian, 2015). Specifically, Division I men's basketball has seen attendance numbers drop 11% in recent years, and FBS football attendance has seen a 7% decline as well (Soffian, 2015; Solomon, 2016). However, unlike Experience UC, a majority of athletics departments charge admission to most NCAA-sponsored sporting events. For example, the Big 10 Conference has 14 schools charging admission for a variety of athletic events (B1G, 2017). These athletics departments continue to try to capitalize at the gate by ticketing spectators to help gain additional revenue, no matter how small (Wolverton, 2007).

As the push to fill athletics facilities grows due to the declining attendance numbers, intercollegiate athletics administrators need to find a balance between generating revenue and fostering fan attendance. Many colleges and universities across the nation are experiencing this issue as "The simple exercise of going to a sporting event has changed significantly… I hope it's cyclical, but there's not really an answer out there right now" (Novy-Williams, 2017, para. 6). In general, attendance numbers in collegiate athletics are declining and the search for solutions is ongoing (Murschel, 2015; New, 2016).

As the numbers continue to decrease, intercollegiate athletics administrators will be forced to reevaluate their policy regarding how they ticket their athletics events. This evaluation is necessary because "ticket prices are a factor that a club can directly manipulate in an attempt to change attendance patterns" (Langhorst, 2014, para. 6). This concept was illustrated by the University of Cincinnati when they altered their ticket prices and chose not to charge at all, with hopes of increasing attendance at home events. Like predetermined marketing and promotional items, "attendance may be decided before the games even begin" (Langhorst, 2014, para. 4). In intercollegiate athletics departments, the reasoning behind ticketing policies and practices are ambiguous, and sometimes nonexistent, for nonrevenue sports. For the purposes of the current study, nonrevenue sports will include any NCAA-sponsored athletics program besides football and men's basketball. Specifically related to nonrevenue sports, a content analysis of ticket policies showed little to no consistency between divisions and conferences. Additionally, the policies varied by the number of sports ticketed and the prices for each sporting event. In sum, the purpose of the paper is to discover the reasoning behind ticket policies and practices for nonrevenue sports. Further, the authors aim to address the gap in the literature surrounding the reasons behind choosing to charge or not to charge for admission.

Literature Review

When deciding to ticket a sporting event, athletics administrators at a university must consider numerous factors. First, they must account for the overall gross seating capacity available for their facility (Gargalianos, 2002). Next, the ticket directors must secure an allotment of tickets to be reserved for officials, accredited media, and an athlete's guests (Gargalianos, 2002). The ticket department also needs to determine the pricing of tickets in relation to the categories of buyers they could potentially have at each event (Gargalianos, 2002). These buyers include, but are not limited to students, donors, and the general public. Finally, the athletics ticket department at a university needs to understand the consequences of having low attendance numbers and unfilled athletics facilities due to unsold tickets. Our study aims to fill the current literature gap surrounding this final point.

Outside of football and men's basketball, no other sports consistently bring large attendance numbers and revenue across the board for NCAA Division I universities. Because of the increased costs of running athletics programs, many NCAA Division I universities are ticketing their nonrevenue sporting events. Charging admission for all sporting events is just one policy that exists among Division I universities. For example, Texas A&M University at College Station charges admission for most, but not all, of their athletics events (12th Man Foundation, 2015). The university tickets all NCAA sponsored sports except for equestrian, golf, and swimming and diving (12th Man Foundation, 2015).

Legitimacy

According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." Over time, legitimacy is built when organizations such as Division I athletic departments conform to the rules, norms, cultural values, and expectations that succeed within a broader social system such as the NCAA (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For example, Washington, Forman, Suddaby, and Ventresca (2005) expressed that the NCAA has developed a set of institutional strategies aimed at enhancing its status and legitimacy in the United States. These strategies for increasing legitimacy at the industry level are shown throughout research involving affiliations with conferences and private regulatory associations (Washington, 2005; Baxter, Margavio, & Lambert, 1996).

Within sport, these regulatory agencies include sport national governing bodies, nongovernmental organizations, the NCAA, and athletics conferences (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These agencies "create expectations about the most appropriate ways to organize and conduct business" (Welty-Peachey & Bruening, 2011, p. 203). Because Division I universities are regulated by the same agencies, the university athletic departments are "likely to espouse similar core values, offer the same kinds of services, and prioritize budgets in a similar fashion," (Cooper & Weight, 2011, p. 75).

Reputation

According to Shapiro (1982), "reputation is a phenomenon that involves a social comparison regarding an expectation of quality that occurs under imperfect information." Because reputation is an intangible resource, many individuals and organizations use it to predict quality and reliability in regard to outcomes (Hall 1993; Herbig & Milewicz, 1997; Shonk & Bravo, 2010). Within the context of universities, reputation can relate to their athletic as well as their academic endeavors. The President of Colorado State, Tony Frank, stated, "Reputations are tricky, subjective things. I imagine that in every school's analysis of athletics, impact on reputation is a big factor" (2011). This impact can be evaluated by the degree to which the event takes away or adds to the overall reputation of the organization (Ticket Peak, 2013).

A university's reputation is not the only concern for Division I athletic departments who are in the midst of a financial crisis. According to Daly (2011), "Whereas some athletic departments are opting to eliminate sports or switch divisions to maximize savings, others are trying to generate more from Division I's traditional revenue sources" (p. 2). James and Ross noted (2004) that athletic departments need to look past ticket sales for football and men's basketball. They suggest "an overlooked source of revenue generation is increased sales to university Olympic sports" (James & Ross, 2004). As Bill Sutton, Aspire's general manager states, "The goal is simple: Leave no money on the table" (Schwarz, 2011).

The detailed sections above on legitimacy theory and related literature on athletic ticket policies and reputation, guided the authors in the creation of their theoretical framework as well as their methodological procedures. Drawing from the theoretical framework and key concepts, the purpose of this paper is to discover the reasoning behind collegiate athletics ticket policies and practices for nonrevenue sporting events.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with athletics directors and directors of ticket operations at six Midwest intercollegiate institutions. Author One conducted interviews via phone communication as well as in person at the college/university of the participant. Interviews were initially solicited to obtain a representative sample of the different intercollegiate athletics divisions. Once this was achieved, convenience sampling was used based on the willingness of athletics directors and directors of ticket operations to participate. Interviews were concluded once saturation was achieved. According to Gratton and Jones (2004), data saturation occurs when, "any further data collection will not provide any different information from that you already have, that is you are not learning anything new" (p. 153).

Participants

The sample consisted of six athletics directors and directors of ticket operations at intercollegiate institutions. The researchers sampled participants who directly influenced the ticketing policies. At larger institutions, specific directors of ticket operations were found and those people were interviewed, while at smaller institutions, there was no specific director of ticket operations position. Therefore, the interviews took place with the athletics director because they ultimately oversaw the ticketing polices and procedures. Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry, the sampling method for these semi-structured interviews was convenience sampling, which is described as "a type of nonprobability sampling typically consisting of persons either known by the and/or readily available to the investigators (Özdemir, St. Louis, & Topbas, 2011, p. 263).

Procedures

An interview guide was utilized and paired with a semi-structured interview approach. Defined by Gratton and Jones (2004), a semi-structured interview approach is where "the researcher adopts a flexible approach to data collection, and can alter the sequence of questions or probe for more information with subsidiary questions" (p. 141). Each interview was conducted on the respondent's campus or via phone communication. The interviews lasted between 15 to 30 minutes and included questions related to current ticketing policies, perceptions of legitimacy, revenue potential, attendance, and exposure.

Overall, a diverse group of intercollegiate athletics divisions were present in the study. Athletics directors and directors of ticket operations were represented from two NCAA Division I level schools, one NCAA Division II level school, and two NCAA Division III level schools. One NAIA Division II level school was also present in this study.

Analysis

The authors transcribed the responses and used both deductive and inductive approaches when analyzing the data. A deductive approach is based on established theory or models that ultimately guide the analysis, while an inductive approach is derived directly from the data and typically moves from specific to more general statements (Burns & Grove, 2005; Chinn & Kramer, 1999). Along with the deductive and inductive approaches that were utilized, open coding was performed. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), "open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (p. 61). The responses were coded by the authors based on a priori themes from the interview prompts, past literature, and theoretical framework. To provide evidence of reliability and validity, the authors used the five verification strategies. For a full review of this technique, see Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002).

Results and Discussion

The results of the open coding process are presented below. Responses to questions directly related to the ticketing of nonrevenue sporting events generally fell into one of three theme categories mentioned throughout the literature: (1) perceptions of legitimacy (2) reputation, (3) attendance. Additionally, emergent themes related to facilities/venues and division level differences appeared during the inductive analysis. Below, the authors categorized each overarching theme, detailed how it emerged from the data, and provided context for finding as well as illustrating it with direct quotes. Further, overlap existed between the common themes of perceptions of legitimacy and creating value within intercollegiate athletics departments.

Perceptions of Legitimacy and Creating Value

In response to questions regarding the general purpose for charging admission to nonrevenue sporting events, athletics directors and directors of ticket operations gave consistent responses that tied back to the theme of perceptions of legitimacy. It was made abundantly clear by all participants that perceptions of legitimacy were highly considered when developing ticketing policies. These findings mimic previous work by DiMaggio and Powell where "organizational actions are often motivated by a desire to increase the organization's legitimacy" (as cited in Weiss & Anderson, 1991, p. 1). Ticket Director One conveyed the following when discussing how ticketing policies are created at his/her current institution:

> There is always a perception standpoint that we try to take into account. What is the public perception of our program if we do not charge admission? This is especially the case when spectators are accustomed to paying admission at the youth level all the way up. If they attend a Division I level event, and it is free, there could be questions of legitimacy.

The statement above shows how the concept of legitimacy is taken into account when deciding whether an event should be ticketed or not. The ticket director quoted above directly compares his/her event to other sporting events in regard to legitimacy purposes. This is consistent with the argument that legitimacy increases when the organization is supported by more constituents compared to its alternatives (Meyer & Scott, 1983).

Interestingly, respondents pointed to aspects of reputation when discussing current ticketing policies related to attendance for nonrevenue sporting events. Capozzi (2005) suggested that reputation, especially in corporate situations, could be considered a valuable resource that ultimately contributes to an organization's sustainable competitive advantage. Because reputation can contribute to attendance numbers, this concept is one of importance when considering to charge or not charge admission. Athletics Director One pointed to success and reputation in the following representative quote:

> I think success and reputation affect attendance. There is no doubt about that in my mind. You are going to have those people who are going to come to the games no matter what. They are old time loyal fans that are traditional. They are the fans that will probably go to every game whether the team is ten and zero or two and eight because of the school's history and reputation.

This interviewee response depicts the notion that reputation helps drive attendance numbers because of a loyal traditional fan base. Because each athletics department and program have their own history and reputation, this concept is very individualized and could be perceived as one of the significant attributes that distinguish one program from another (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006). Athletics directors and directors of ticket operations should evaluate the history and tradition of each individual program when creating ticket policies because of its noted affect on attendance.

Attendance

Another apparent theme that emerged through the interviews was the importance of attendance numbers when considering ticketing policies. Athletics Director Three stated,

> Attendance numbers are pretty much 90% of our decision making process in regards to ticketing nonrevenue sporting events. We do not want to price ourselves out and have people not come to our games because they think it is too much.

Some athletics directors and directors of ticket operations indicated they chose not to charge admission primarily because it would impact their attendance numbers. This was shown through Athletics Director Two's representative quote:

> I think there are some sports that if we tried to charge admission, we would not have anyone show up outside of the parents and people with passes. We are concerned that charging admission for certain sports would cause us to lose those people who are just going to stop by and watch.

These athletics directors and directors of ticket operations show attendance as a high priority when making ticketing policy decisions. They are constantly weighing legitimacy and potential revenue with the number of spectators they could have attend an event. Placing a high priority on attendance can be beneficial since ticket prices may help predict attendance numbers (Langhorst, 2014). This priority is key since attendance numbers can be predicted before the event even occurs because of the price of a ticket (Langhorst, 2014). For example, Athletics Director Four stated, “When we know we want to get a big crowd, we will let everyone in free. We do that sporadically throughout each sport to try and attract more fans to that game.”

Division Level Differences: Revenue Potential

Beyond the initial themes that were derived from the literature, another theme emerged from the inductive analysis: division level differences. The primary division level difference that appeared surrounded the topic of ticket sales and the overall revenue potential. Interviewee responses fell into one of two categories: (1) revenue potential is considered when ticketing all sporting events or (2) revenue potential is not considered when ticketing all sporting events. The results mimicked previous literature where athletic departments from larger divisions gain revenue from ticket sales, while smaller divisions gain their revenue in areas outside of athletics (Coakley, 2008; NCAA Division Differences, 2016; Snyder & Waterstone; 2015). Athletics Director Two stated, “Unlike Division I programs, we do not depend on ticket sales to run our athletics department, because quite frankly, we would never make it.” A representative quote from Athletics Director Four was very similar in the sense that they do not depend on ticket sales for revenue:

> Our mission statement is to provide an academic athletics environment for people to come and secure a vary useable high level degree in whatever discipline they choose as well as to participate in a very quality competitive NCAA Division II program. We cannot rely on ticket sales to mandate that operation and the cost associated with that. We do not have the market base or the population to rely on ticket sales for revenue.

As shown through the representative quotes, a clear divide exists between the different divisional levels of intercollegiate athletics. The emphasis for Division II and III is to educate students through academically centered and athletically enhanced opportunities (NCAA Division Differences, 2016). Although the Division I level has an academic statement as well, a larger priority is placed on athletics, which is shown through the budgets of the athletics departments (Burnsed, 2014). Director of Ticket Operations Two states:

> The revenue potential with any given sport is always a part of the conversation. With the nonrevenue sports, we have to consider if we are going to be able to sell enough tickets to come out even. That means will we make enough money to pay the people working the event?

Ultimately, all interviewee respondents mentioned the revenue potential. As shown from the representative quotes, divisional differences are present and known among the athletics directors and directors of ticket operations.

Facilities and Venue

The final theme discovered in the current study dealt with the concept of facilities and venues. Every interviewee mentioned this concept in direct relation to why they do not ticket some of their nonrevenue sporting events. Athletics Director Three stated, "Ultimately we do not charge for a lot of our sports because our venues are not completely controlled. There is no way of containing that area." Director of Ticket Operations One had a similar response, saying, "Even though we are a Division I institution, we have facilities that are off campus with wide open spaces. There is physically no way to control the crowd and charge admission." Despite facilities and venues being a common response to reasons athletic events are not ticketed, little to no literature was found to support this point. As indicated in the future research section, delving into this theme could be beneficial both practically and academically.

Concluding Thoughts

In addition to this study addressing a gap in the previous literature, results from this study could provide useful practical considerations primarily in the finance realm. From a finance standpoint, it is important to consider the reasons athletics departments are ticketing some sporting events but not others. Importantly, understanding different trends that have emerged throughout time regarding ticketing practices is vital when developing future policies. Specifically, knowing the importance an intercollegiate athletics department places on perceived revenue compared to attendance throughout the years is beneficial. With this information, practitioners can evaluate the revenue and nonrevenue program elements that are most highly valued by athletic directors and directors of ticket operations.

Information taken from this study should provide guidance for athletics directors and directors of ticket operations in regards to ticketing nonrevenue sporting events. Understanding the connection between legitimacy, reputation, revenue potential, and attendance is important to athletic administrators and their ticketing policies and procedures. When examined closely, the current findings could show a broader trend of similarities or differences between university athletic departments. While common themes existed, individual ticketing policies differed between schools, conferences, and divisions. These findings can aid practitioners and athletics administrators by showing how different markets, reputations, and fan bases can impact ticketing policies of schools who have the same divisional expectations. Finally, as posited earlier, the idea of facilities/venues impacting current intercollegiate ticketing policies could provide an array of potential implications. Specifically, this theme could emerge in studies that address the design of new facilities being constructed.

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