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College Football Revival

*Analyzing the Impact of Marketing Efforts on Key Stakeholders at a
Division I FCS Commuter School*

Lucas A. Christiansen

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Abstract

The current study examined the impact of a recently restarted football program and a new on-campus stadium on the alumni and students of a Division I FCS commuter school. Results showed that alumni felt more connected to the university because of the new football program, they were more satisfied with their overall game-day experience, and the new football stadium was more likely to increase their game attendance when compared to students. Supplementary analysis highlights key differences in how each group rated individual elements of the game-day experience and the mediums used by each group for obtaining team-related information.

Keywords: *Collegiate athletics, commuter schools, game-day experience, sense of community, stakeholder theory*

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Introduction

In sport management, researchers have discovered the power stakeholders can have on the success of an organization and the importance of satisfying stakeholder needs (Morehead, Shapiro, Madden, Reams, & McEvoy, 2017). Establishing a strong sense of community (SOC) is one way to engage important stakeholders and increase the organization's chances for success (Kelly & Dixon, 2011). In collegiate athletics, universities sometimes use football as a way to help foster a SOC between the institution and its students and alumni (Kelly & Dixon, 2011). Since 2010, 11 Division I schools have added or restarted a football program (Dosh, 2015). However, with the addition or revival of a NCAA Division I football program comes many challenges. Marketing teams must be attentive to the individualized needs and desires of each group of stakeholders in an effort to facilitate buy-in from all groups, while also cultivating SOC between each group and the university.

This study seeks to compare a university's two main stakeholders—alumni and students—and their response to a newly revived football program, as well as provide insight for collegiate athletic departments into how they can best satisfy the needs of each stakeholder group without prioritizing one group over another. Alumni are sometimes shown preferential treatment, and in this particular study alumni were given prime tailgating locations that put them in the middle of game-day festivities, while students were given a more secluded location. Although those alumni are more likely to be the ones supporting the university through financial contributions, the students will be relied upon in the future for those same donations. Alumni giving is often correlated to the SOC that a student experiences when attending the university (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009), and our results show that students have not bought in as much as other stakeholder groups at the studied institution. Therefore, schools are in danger of isolating their current student body for the more immediate satisfaction of other stakeholder groups.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Stakeholder theory considers 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 et al., 2017). Collegiate athletics can be examined through the lens of stakeholder theory, where athletic departments use sport to create a sense of community among 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 that the more involved students were on campus, the higher their SOC. It has also been shown that improved facilities can help create a greater SOC (Kelly & Dixon, 2011). DeSchriver and Jensen (2002) found that the older the facility, the more negative the impact on attendance. Kirk and Lewis (2013) also found that a student's level of collegiate sense of community (CSOC) can be estimated by where a student lives (i.e., on-campus vs. off-campus) and how long he or she has been in school. 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.

Furthermore, studies have shown that the stronger the identification and involvement students have with their university, the more likely they are to give back to the university (e.g., through financial donations) and do so continually (McDearmon 2010; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). 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). 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; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010). Many schools have added football because they view it as a way to increase their school's image and prestige (Kelly & Dixon, 2011), as well as to increase alumni donations (Tucker, 2004).

The following 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 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.

RQ1: Is there a difference in how students and alumni identify with the University and a revived football program?

RQ2: When looking specifically at game-day experiences, is there a difference in levels of satisfaction between students and alumni?

RQ3: Is there a difference between student and alumni reactions to the new on-campus stadium and the influence it has on their game-day attendance?

Method

Procedures and Instrumentation

Data were collected from alumni and students of a mid-major sized commuter university in the southeast United States that restarted its football program three years prior and was playing its inaugural season in a newly constructed on-campus stadium. Permission was granted by the athletic department to collect data on-

site prior to home football games. Participants were surveyed in tailgating areas outside of the stadium prior to kickoff and surveys were completed electronically using mobile iPad devices administered by trained assistants. Instrument items were adapted from prior studies to measure seven spectator-related elements including three elements related to spectator identification with the university and its football program (Wann & Branscombe, 1993); three elements related to game-day experience (Brady & Cronin, 2001); and one item was used to measure the new stadium's influence on game attendance (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). A 5-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree was used to measure each response. Participants were also asked two supplemental questions to better understand any distinct differences that may exist between the two stakeholders including what areas they feel the game-day operations staff can improve upon and what media each stakeholder uses to obtain team information.

Participants

Participants in the study included 211 current students and 141 alumni ($N = 352$) of the mid-major sized commuter university. The majority of participants were male for students (56.9%) and alumni (58.2%) and the ages among students were primarily 25 and under (95.7%), while there was a more distributed age range among alumni participants (21–29, 25.5%; 30–39, 19.1%; 40–49, 20.6%; 50–59, 18.4%, 60–69, 13.5%, and 70+, 2.8%). Participants were also asked to indicate whom they attend games with, and while a large percentage of both students (86.3%) and alumni (85.8%) attend games with friends, 51.8% of alumni stated they attend games with family/kids, compared to 18.5% for students. Both stakeholders reported similar percentages for attending games with (students/alumni): co-workers (10.4%/14.9%), group (22.8%/19.2%), and religious group (8.1%/7.1%), while there was a greater disparity for the category of “other” (22.8%/5.7%).

Analysis and Results

Stakeholder assessments of the seven spectator-related elements showed that alumni, when compared to students, reported a higher connection to the university through football, a higher level of satisfaction with their game-day experience, and a higher intention to attend games because of the new on-campus stadium. Group analysis was performed using a set of seven *t*-tests and results showed that statistically significant differences existed, at the .05 level, between how students and alumni assessed all seven of the spectator-related elements. A summary of these results can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Group Analysis Results (Students vs. Alumni) on Elements Related to Identification, Game-Day Experience, and Attendance

		Mean	SD	T-score	P-value
I feel more connected to the university because of the new football program.	Student	4.12	1.05	3.261	<.05
	Alumni	4.41	.68		
I identify myself as a loyal fan of the new football program.	Student	4.29	.88	2.684	<.05
	Alumni	4.53	.75		
I feel more connected with others who follow the new football program.	Student	4.11	.94	4.021	<.05
	Alumni	4.50	.79		
The game-day experience met my expectations.	Student	4.12	1.05	2.929	<.05
	Alumni	4.41	.68		
The game-day experience exceeded my expectations.	Student	3.95	1.06	4.164	<.05
	Alumni	4.43	.76		
The tailgating atmosphere exceeded my expectations.	Student	3.93	1.10	4.208	<.05
	Alumni	4.39	.86		
Bringing the football stadium on campus will increase my attendance at home games.	Student	4.36	0.90	3.322	<.05
	Alumni	4.65	0.65		

In addition, supplemental analysis found that a greater percentage of students than alumni recommended improvements in parking (63.5% vs. 28.4%), traffic flow (29.4% vs. 17.7%), tailgating (37.0% vs. 22.00%), and concessions (15.2% vs. 7.1%) to improve the game-day experience. Differences were also found in the different media students and alumni use to obtain team information. For instance, while a higher percentage of students used Instagram (36.5% vs. 19.9%) and Twitter (30.8% vs. 12.1%), a higher percentage of alumni used Facebook (42.6% vs. 25.1%) to stay informed of team-related activities. A summary of the supplemental analysis can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Supplementary Analysis (Students vs. Alumni) on Opportunity Areas for Improving Game-Day Experiences and Media Used to Obtain Team Information

What areas of game-day operations could [the university] improve on? (Mark all that apply)	Students (N = 211)	Percentage Checked	Alumni (N = 141)	Percentage Checked
Marketing	49	23.22%	25	17.73%
Parking	134	63.51%	40	28.37%
Ticket allocation	45	21.33%	21	14.89%
Merchandise	40	18.96%	27	19.15%
Game time	23	10.90%	14	9.93%
Tailgating	78	36.97%	31	21.99%
Concessions	32	15.17%	10	7.09%
Communication	35	16.59%	18	12.77%
Traffic flow	62	29.38%	25	17.73%

Where do you go for [team] information? (Mark all that apply)	Students (N = 211)	Percentage Checked	Alumni (N = 141)	Percentage Checked
University website	142	67.30%	112	79.43%
App	42	19.91%	18	12.77%
Instagram	77	36.49%	28	19.86%
Facebook	53	25.12%	60	42.55%
Friends	75	35.55%	51	36.17%
Twitter	65	30.81%	17	12.06%
Email	67	31.75%	31	21.99%
TV	31	14.69%	28	19.86%
Radio	10	4.74%	17	12.06%
Newspaper	17	8.06%	31	21.99%

Discussion and Implications

Identifying and addressing the needs of stakeholders is crucial 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 study presented here, findings showed that compared to students, alumni reported identifying more closely with the university because of its recently restarted football program; that the administration exceeded game-day expectations of alumni significantly more than it did for students; and that the new on-campus stadium had a greater impact on home attendance for alumni than for students.

Regarding a higher sense of identification with the university through football, our findings are in line with those of Heere and Katz (2014), who found that a new football program was more important to the alumni base's connection to the university than it was for students and faculty. As discussed, the 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 felt significantly less connected to the university through the football program than did school alumni. While student attendance for many college football programs has been declining (Bonesteel, 2018), game attendance at commuter schools is oftentimes even less (Newbold et al., 2011). This study shows that schools run the risk of further alienating current students who will be relied on in the future to support the program through financial contributions.

As schools continue to add football programs to raise the prestige of their university or create a higher sense of community on campus (Kelly & Dixon, 2011), the number of commuter students also continues to increase (Kirk & Lewis, 2015). This means that schools must not only be mindful of student needs, they must also work toward encouraging less-involved commuter students to attend. This is no small task, as indicators such as social media interaction have proven ineffective in predicting attendance (Haught, Willis, Furrow, Morris III, & Freberg, 2016). One strategy for more effective social media marketing is to segment the student market further based on aspects of the game-day experience that each segment is most interested in including the pageantry, tailgating, or socialization with others (Haught et al., 2016; Newbold et al., 2010). Once groups have been identified, athletic departments can communicate specialized messages highlighting the different characteristics of attending a game for each segment instead of one generic message meant to appeal to all groups. Findings here suggest athletic departments should consider the target group, the message, and the platform in order to create more effective marketing campaigns.

The three biggest improvements that students marked for the university to improve on were parking, tailgating, and traffic flow. When considering the game-day needs of commuter students specifically, most will need to park somewhere when attending the event. In addition, parking areas often serve as tailgating

areas prior to games. Athletic departments should work to put these students in a location with better parking options to improve their experience and encourage game attendance.

Promotions have also been shown to have a positive effect on attendance (DeSchraver & Jensen, 2002; Trail & Kim, 2011). The university examined here employed this strategy during their previous basketball season, using student-only giveaways to increase student attendance. The success of this strategy suggests that adding more promotions and giveaways to the football schedule may incentivize more students to attend.

It is important to note that more than half of the alumni attended the school's football games with their family or children. Athletic departments should be cognizant of the number of families that attend games and provide more activities for families in and around the stadium. Similarly, marketers could consider something comparable for students that features live music, food, or similar attractions. Ancillary events such as concerts, pep rallies, or other student-oriented (or student-exclusive) events have proven effective in increasing motivation for attendance. Specifically, those that have a "ritualistic" element to them can positively influence team identification (McDonald & Karg, 2014), especially among younger generations (Greene, Smith, & Russell, 2017). As schools revive programs or start entirely new ones, they should look to implement traditions and game-day "rituals" as early as possible to create that connection with students who likely have no previous ties to football at the university. By focusing a portion of the game-day experience specifically on student satisfaction, athletic departments can hope to build a stronger sense of community, increase student identification with the university, and prompt this next generation of alumni to support their alma mater through financial donations and other contributions.

Future Research

While research suggests that the type of cohort (e.g., students and alumni) affects the sport experience, age has also been shown to have a significant effect on sport consumption (Funk, Alexandris, & McDonald, 2016; Shonk, Pate, Lee, & Bosley, 2017). However, there is a need for more literature analyzing attendance factors for millennials. Furthermore, as Generation Z begins to enter college and attend sporting events, there is a need to study their attendance motivations and how they consume sport compared to other generations. There is also a need for updated literature regarding the effect of promotions on fan attendance, especially among college students. As ancillary events continue to be an important part of the overall game-day experience, studying what types of events are most effective at increasing customer satisfaction, as well as studying the effect across generations, could prove useful to athletic departments as they decide how best to allocate their limited resources.

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