“Incentivizing”: Rewards Based Programs and Their Impact on Athletics, Retention, and Engagement

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Introduction

Vincent Tinto (1975) revealed numerous factors that are important to engagement and retention in American higher education, specifically stating that the level of academic and social integration is of the highest of factors (p. 103). Thus, universities create opportunities that combine academics and social aspects to engage students and keep them on the path to graduation. The athletic department serves to enhance these opportunities. Though athletic events and other university opportunities are abundant, often they are not integrated across the university resulting in a significant number of students who do not take advantage of what is offered.

Higher education institutions continue to search for new ways to retain and engage students at the university level. Furthermore, athletic departments are frequently searching for innovative ways to “incentivize” their markets thereby enhancing events and the college atmosphere. One important aspect of the higher education experience is the athletic experience, especially the experience of the fans. Determining if rewards incentives can have an effect on fans’ attendance levels may lead to more conclusive information about developing a positive college experience and retaining students. Understanding the reason for fan attendance is a major element in sport marketing and can lead to a more effective targeting of specific demographics. Getting a clear picture of the current status of students’ experiences, including athletic event attendance, yields information that aids in the modification of current institutional functions.

Review of the Literature

Retention of students at higher education institutions is based on creating a complete academic and social environment for students (Tinto, 1975). A previous study by Terenzini and Wright (1987) confirmed this reasoning in regards to first year positive experiences relating to level of integration in subsequent years. By engaging students early through the means of athletic events, universities have a better chance of engaging their students and persuading them to remain as students over the years. Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individuals into the systems, university wide, the greater will be the commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion (Tinto, 1975). A successful program is one that has a broad commitment to the welfare and education of students. Successful retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They are committed to the development of supportive educational and social communities as well as the education of all of their students. The higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college system, which includes athletics, the greater will be the commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion leading to persistence (Mannan, 2007).

Purpose of the study

In a time of economic uncertainty retention and engagement become critical in defining a successful higher education institution. Developing academic and social integration into the educational experience are the key factors in creating and maintaining a successful institution. To date there has only been a dearth of universities that have utilized incentive base rewards programs to further stimulate retention and engagement, i.e., University of Texas, Northern Illinois University, and the University of South Florida. In 2009, The University of Texas Varsity Rewards program demonstrated success achieving program enrollment of 400 active members. However, this program was
specific to the athletic department, included a $75 membership fee, and does not include the integration of other institutional events (University of Texas Longhorns, 2009).

The purpose of this research was to procure information regarding students’ current level of interest in campus activities in 2009 as well as identify their perceived level of interest and support of a rewards incentive program. A total of 1,134 students at midsized, Midwestern University were surveyed for this research. The survey approach ensured a semi-random representative sample of the University student population. Anonymity was ensured and contributed to the sincerity of responses. The survey inquired about the student's perceived attendance levels if a reward program was in place and the rate of interest for attending based on possible redemption prizes. Students were asked to rate on a scale of one to seven their current attendance level to certain categories of events, such as commencement, the arts (musical, theatre, exhibits), athletic events, regional campus events, student organized events, workshops, and lecture/speaker series. The goal of the survey was to get an understanding of current attendance and awareness levels, project how and if those levels would change if an incentive program was established, and rate perceived level of attendance based on different redemption prizes.

Analysis and Results

Surveys were entered in SPSS version 15. A variety of analyses were utilized to gain an understanding of the data acquired. Analysis of the survey provided additional insight to further understand the relationship(s) specific to the following:

- Item 1 served to understand the current level of attendance for each survey entrant.
- Item 3 looked to acquire the survey entrant’s perception of involvement in the rewards program.
- Item 4 sought the survey entrant's perception of specific attendance to future events if a rewards program was in place.

Of the 1,134 survey respondents 48.6% were freshman, 18.7% sophomores, 13.2% juniors, and 19.5 were of senior status or higher. Over eighty percent of the survey respondents identified that if a rewards program were in place it would impact their choice to attend sponsored events. In addition, 76.5% revealed that if a rewards program were in place they would actively seek reward program events. T-test conducted between attendance patterns revealed significant differences within each of the nine categories. A more comprehensive look into current participation levels and interest in participating in the rewards program were conducted utilizing the SPSS "select if" function. Results revealed that of those who never or rarely attend sponsored athletic events nearly 80% would be influence by a rewards program. In reference to art exhibits nearly 68% would be affected and specific to student organized activities, nearly 70 would be affected. A complete presentation of all data analysis will be presented. Overall, the research identified an overwhelming positive response toward the rewards program incentives. The results yielded a satisfactory affirmation that the student populations, with enthusiasm, accept the constructs of the program.

References


