The Football Factor: Creating a Sense of Community on Campus

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Abstract 2010-125

June 4, 2010
2:20 PM
25-minute oral presentation
(Snowy Egret)

Although some have argued athletics has detracted from the academic mission of U.S. universities (see Gerdy, 2006; Shulman & Bowen, 2001; Sperber, 2000), sport has played and continues to play an important role on university campuses. Since the first intercollegiate athletic event in 1852, sport has provided a common ground that has fostered community, met the need for affiliation, and served a unifying function among the increasingly diverse campus populations (Chu, 1989; Gerdy, 1997). Football, in particular, seems to provide a forum for bringing people together and engendering community. It may not be surprising, then, that despite the high-start up costs and financial investment required, at least 17 U.S. colleges are set to start football programs between 2009-2013 (National Football Foundation, 2009).

While sport programs are credited with creating a sense of community (SOC) on campus, this outcome is not automatic (Warner & Dixon, in review). Thus, it should not be assumed that a football program would instantaneously cultivate a SOC on campuses (Chalip, 2006). Rather, empirical evidence should be sought to determine what, if any, association football has with SOC for students. With that said, a unique opportunity arises when a university decides to start a football program such as that which occurred in the Fall of 2009 at Old Dominion University (ODU). The primary purpose of this study was to assess the impact that attendance at football games had on students’ SOC. A secondary purpose was to examine the factor structure of the Collegiate Psychological Sense of Community Scale (CPSCS) (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996), an instrument that has been used in several studies, but always as a uni-dimensional measure. Evidence of sub-dimensions may allow for more meaningful interpretation of findings.

Using a pre-test and post-test design, this study examines the impact of a new football program on university students’ SOC, which is defined as a community characteristic that leads to its members to feeling a sense of belonging, attachment, and shared faith and interest in goals or values. Prior to the start of ODU’s first intercollegiate football game, current students were assessed on their level of SOC and other behavioral variables. The CPSCS was used to measure SOC via an online survey. A panel of experts in student affairs, athletics, community development, and quantitative statistics reviewed the survey for face and construct validity. Field testing was also utilized to assess both validity and reliability of the instrument.

The initial pre-test was sent out to 1) a random sample of 5,000 full-time ODU students enrolled at the main campus during the 2009 fall semester, and 2) a purposive sample of 2,113 students who held tickets to attend the first home football game. The pre-test was completed by 1,668 students for a response rate of 23.5%. Results from the pre-test indicated that the demographic profiles of ticket holders and non-ticket holders were similar. The majority of respondents were female (61.9% of non-ticket holders and 59.5% of ticket holders), Caucasian (66% of non-ticket holders and 69% of ticket holders), in state students (90.9% of non-ticket holders and 86.9% of ticket holders), and lived off campus (63.6% of non-ticket holders and 68.3% of ticket holders). These results were consistent with the overall population of students at ODU.

Preliminary analysis was conducted on the 14-item CPSCS using pre-test data to examine the factor structure of the sense of community construct based on the current sample of students. The CPSCS has been measured as a uni-dimensional construct in previous examinations; however, no data reduction techniques have been conducted to determine if multiple sub-dimensions exist within this construct. Therefore, the pre-test dataset was randomly split into two halves. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with principle components extraction and promax rotation techniques was conducted on the first half of the data to identify the factor structure of the CPSCS. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted on the second half of the data to confirm the factor structure of the CPSCS.
EFA results clearly revealed a 2-factor structure with 65.26% of the variance explained. A total of 2 items were eliminated from the analysis due to double loading and interpretation issues. The CPSCS contained 12 items loaded onto two factors. The first factor named External Focus consisted of 6 items related to the external feelings regarding the campus environment (e.g., campus life is stimulating, there is a sociable atmosphere at ODU, there is a strong feeling of togetherness on campus). The second factor named Internal Focus consisted of 6 items related to internal attachment/identification with the university (e.g., I feel very attached to ODU, I would recommend ODU to others, I feel like I belong here at ODU). Cronbach’s alpha scores for the first half of the dataset were .88 and .89 for external and internal factors, respectively.

CFA results from the second half of the dataset indicated a satisfactory fit: X2(53) = 680.37, p = <.001; SRMR = .05; CFI = .97, NNFI = .97. The 2 factor, 12 item CPSCS structure appeared to hold. Additionally, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores were .563 and .634 and Cronbach’s alpha scores were .87 and .89 for external and internal factors, respectively.

CFA and validity and reliability tests will be conducted on the post-test data prior to subsequent examinations in order to provide further evidence of an appropriate factor structure for the CPSCS.

Subsequent analysis of pre-test data indicated minor differences in SOC perceptions between students with football tickets and students without football tickets. Ticket holders had slightly higher External Focus scores (M = 3.77, SD = .685) and Internal Focus scores (M = 4.13, SD = .653) compared to non-ticket holders (M = 3.75, SD = .680 and M = 4.04, SD = .706 for External Focus and Internal Focus, respectively).

The post-test will be conducted after ODU’s last home football game of the 2009 season. SOC score changes from pre-test to post-test will be compared between football game attendees and non-attendees. Additionally, comparisons in SOC perceptions will be made based on various demographic, psychographic, and behavioral variables. Furthermore, several possible outcomes associated with SOC will be explored. These outcomes include student retention, satisfaction, attendance at other ODU athletic events, and future donor giving. Complete findings will be presented and implications will be discussed.