A Qualitative Investigation of the Effect of Athletics on Student Team Identity, University Identity, and External Prestige

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Organizational theory/culture
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This study analyzed the impacts of intercollegiate athletics on the development of college students' fan identity, university identity, and perceived external prestige. The qualitative process included 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at two central National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I universities in the United States. Results supported previous literature that suggested that athletics plays an important role in the creation and development of students experience and image of themselves as fans and college students. Support was also found for athletics influence, both positive and negative, on the perceived external image of the university as a whole. A unique and lasting institutional brand image. Data also provided insight into the process of branding and image development, suggesting that athletics is an expected aspect of the larger collegiate ideal that many students are seeking within their college experience. Higher education administrators and athletics leaders would benefit from gaining a better understanding of the process of image development at the university level, and especially the impact that athletics can have on this process.

Review of relevant literature

In a contested marketplace for faculty, students, administrators, and government financial and political support, higher education institutions have begun to accept the necessity for competition, including the development and maintenance of their university image. One high-profile segment of the higher education landscape is intercollegiate athletics, especially at the NCAA Division I-A level. Scholars have already recognized the impact that athletics may have on a universities perceived external prestige and overall image (Sung & Yang, 2008; Theus, 1993; Toma, 2003). While athletics is often the most visible aspect of collegiate life at many Division I NCAA universities, a relatively small amount of research has been conducted examining the effects and promotion of athletics on the development of institutional identity (for more review on university image, see Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003; Kazoleas, Kim, & Moffitt, 2001; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Palacio, Meneses, & Perez, 2002; Sung & Yang, 2008; Theus, 1993). Intercollegiate athletics have been shown to increase student attachment and increase future intent to donate to the university (Clopton & LaPoint, 2008), as well as serve as a platform to bring diverse student populations into a greater sense of campus community (Clopton & Finch, 2008; Toma, 2003).

Institutional identity is made up of an individual's own organizational image and their organizational prestige. Organizational image involves an individual's beliefs as to what makes the institution distinct and enduring (Carmelli, 2005; Toma, 2003). Perceived external prestige or organizational prestige refers to an individual's understanding of how the institution is viewed by outsiders (Carmelli, 2005). Institutional prestige may have critical effects in differentiating a university from other competitors and strengthening stakeholder's institutional identity. Athletics likely plays a unique role in developing institutional prestige, and likely does so in different ways and at various levels for the many university stakeholder groups. Several questions arise regarding the role of athletics in students' development of university image, including the process itself, the timing of this development, and changes to their brand perception over time. Using in-depth individual interviews, we sought to illuminate the role athletics plays in the development of fan identity, university image, and perceived external prestige by current students at two major Division I NCAA institutions.

Appropriate methodology and data analysis

The qualitative methods used for this study were semi-structured, phenomenological interviews (Frey & Fontana, 1993; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Lincoln, 1992) and formal content analysis. Participants included 19 undergraduate students from two, large NCAA Division I university in the central United States. The participants were a purposive sample and were selected from a defined generalized group with characteristics of interest to the study to capture responses from a variety of student perspectives (Coyne, 1997). After reviewing previous research and consulting with other researchers in the sports management field, the authors developed a general outline of questions for the
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interviews. Data was categorized into initial clusters or constellations of ideas using sorting and thematic categorization (Holsti, 1969). With each interview, additional data was coded into the previous categories. Themes were analyzed with respect to frequency and emphasis or importance to the interviewee. Member checking via oral review or email transcripts with each interviewee and methods triangulation were used to provide credibility during the data collection and analysis process (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999).

Discussion/implications/applications

Several main themes emerged from the interviews. First, students saw athletics as a vital part not only of their collegiate experience, but as an important part of the fabric of the community on campus and in the local population. Jake stated that “football brings the morale back to this city.” Sean called athletics a “rallying point” for students and other people around the campus. Secondly, athletics had a central role in developing the university identity and the campus community, as well as promoting a sense of school pride. Matt said: “I want to move away from OSU and be successful and be able to say yes, that is where I went to school- it’s a pride thing.” Not all perceptions were seen as positive, however. Several interviewees commented that athletics receives too much attention and may harm the image of the school, especially for outsiders. Thirdly, students felt like athletics provided exposure for their school that would otherwise not have been possible. This has positives and negatives. Kellie commented about the notoriety: “People I haven’t talked to in years would contact me on Facebook, especially after [the donor] appeared on The View.” Finally, several students commented on the effect of athletics on their perceived external image of the university. Many believed that success in high profile sports, especially football, might lessen the academic prestige of their college. Rachel said that outsiders “may think this is a football, a party school,” because of the focus on athletics.

The results provided several insights into the role of athletics in the development of university brand image from the student’s perspective. Perhaps the most interesting finding is the reinforcement of the notion that college athletics is an important part of the recognition, distinctiveness, and desire for the collegiate ideal. The students felt that athletic success and notoriety might have influenced outsiders’ view of the academic prestige of the university. For current students, however, they believed that the social and experiential aspects of athletics were most beneficial for their university image and experience. They noted that athletics is an expected piece of the larger collegiate ideal that many students are seeking within their college experience. Higher education athletics administrators should be aware of the potentials and pitfalls that athletics can provide in this branding process, especially for current and prospective students. Further analysis should be undertaken to better understand the branding process for this important stakeholder group, and quantitative methods could prove useful to examine the process across various university levels and regions.