Still Undefeated: Exploring the Dimensions of Team Identity among Fans of a Starting College Football Team

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Despite its immense popularity, college athletics is an expensive endeavor that requires substantial subsidies from academic institutions to persevere. According to reports of the NCAA and the Knight Commission (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010) only a few institutions are able to achieve positive net revenues, and in 2006, the average Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) program received 25% of their revenues from their institution in order to at least reach the break even point. In comparison, among Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) programs this average came to 75% of all revenue. Undoubtedly, football plays a central role within the economics of college athletics. While football is consistently the most costly sport to provide, it is also the only athletic program that potentially brings in sufficient money to cover the costs of other collegiate sports and allow universities to operate their programs in the black without any institutional support.

With the exception of some of the traditional powerhouses in college football, the current costs of running a football program are to such a degree that it is impossible for non-traditional football schools to run a financial healthy program without subsidies from the institution, especially if the program is not part of one of the six major conferences. In 2005, the University of Utah Utes football team went undefeated by beating Texas A&M and Arizona during the season, and Pittsburgh in the Fiesta Bowl. While they reported a $4 million profit that year, they were only able to report such positive numbers because of $2.5 million in institutional subsidies and $3.3 million in student fees (“NCAA Financials Report,” 2005). Even after a perfect season, programs such as the University of Utah football are unable to operate at complete financial independence. If these programs run into an unsuccessful year, like the Boise State University Broncos did that same year, they depend strongly on institutional resources, without creating any surplus. That year, approximately 39% of Boise State’s revenue came through some form of institutional support. While the financial picture of the six major conferences is slightly better, even in these conferences, only a few schools are able to run consistently in the black without financial support. This line of investigation becomes even more troubling with the fact that 46% of division 1-A college football programs do not belong to one of the six major conferences. (“College Football Conferences,” 2011).

Yet, despite this bleak financial picture, academic institutions are investing more and more into college athletics, and Kelly and Dixon (In press) identified 37 schools who added, or were planning to add a new football program between 2004 and 2014. The reasoning behind the addition of these expensive football programs is that they serve as the flagship of the athletic department and are better able to attract the attention of the students, the local community and the media than any other program (Oriard, 2009; 2001). Additionally, in most instances, football is seen as one of the few instruments an academic institution has to invoke a sense of community among the students, the alumni, and other stakeholders (Smith, 1990). Yet, the proposition that college athletics, and football in particular provides a sense of community with the university has yet to be validated through empirical research. Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan and James (2011) reported that identity with the university had a significant impact on how students identified with the football team, and it seems likely that this relationship exists in both directions, yet the extent of this effect remains unexplored.

The recent decision of a large university in the Southwest to add a new football program to their athletic department allowed us to examine the effect of this new addition to the university in general and explore how the different dimensions of team identity manifest themselves among a new fan base. Through interviews with the athletic department management team, it became apparent that the management team realized that the addition of the football team was a costly endeavor and stated that it was not their intention to become a profitable program. Due to the rarity of this situation, the researchers concluded that this university serves as a unique case study to examine the effect of a new college football team on an academic institution.

Specifically, this research explores issues of team and university identification in the context of an upstart NCAA
football program. Collegiate athletics have evolved into a significant revenue generator for academic institutions and warrant further examination in sport management research. The complex relationship between academic institutions and their respective athletic programs has produced a variety of research that deals with community development, effects of athletic success on enrollment, financial management, and identity development. This specific study focuses on the multi-dimensional concept of team identity in relation to the beginning of a football program and examines different dimensions of team identity separately. Through the use of surveys, students, faculty/staff, and alumni of a large southwest university were used to explore how different dimensions of team identity manifest themselves among a new fan base. Results indicate that the groups examined vary significantly on several dimensions of both team and university identification. Also, participant responses on team identity dimensions were predictive of how participants responded in regard to university identification. This research has several implications for management of college athletic programs.