Effects of Constraints on Student Attendance in College Football

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Intercollegiate athletics is one of the major aspects of the college experience. Particularly, college football plays a major role in the student culture at NCAA Division I –FBS institutions. Despite of the immense popularity of college football, various FBS institutions have recently been confronted with a decline in student attendance at their football games (Cohen, 2013). This circumstance reflects the fact that student are not attending games like they once were. For instance, the University of Georgia, the number of students at games never exceeded 15,000 over the last four seasons despite Sanford Stadium having a seating capacity of 18,000 students (Cohen, 2013). This trend was also consistent in winning teams such as the University of Alabama, experiencing 32% of its student section unfilled between 2009 and 2012 (Cohen, 2013). As students are future ticket holders and conceivable donors, declining student attendance can be a challenging issue for school administrations and their athletic departments.

Crawford and Godbey (1987) proposed the three dimensions of constraints intervening between leisure choices and actual participation. Their conceptual framework was associated with: intrapersonal barriers which include personal attitudes and attributes; interpersonal barriers which involve social relationships with others; structural barriers which include environmental factors. As constraints in sports are perceived obstacles by fans that impede or prohibit their attendance, Ridinger and Funk (2007) identified multiple attribute factors such as conflicts, traveling difficulties, lack of communication, lack of friends and family involvement, and an individual’s knowledge and interest based on Crawford and Godbey (1987)’s three dimension model.

Research in the field of sport management has not devoted much effort on constraints but some studies have been focused on structural aspects. This was perhaps because “the easiest constraints to identify were those classified as structural constraints” (Samdahl & Jekubovich, 2007, p. 435) and marketers might have some control over the structural aspects of constraints (Trail et al., 2008). Samdahl and Jekubovich (2007) argued that for the most part constraint research is insufficient if all three constraints are not investigated as a whole. There is clearly a lack of literature dealing with the issue of barriers to student attendance, and with that lack comes a gap in knowledge that could otherwise aid intercollege athletics in filling student sections and selling tickets. The current study was intended to use a comprehensive set of measures of the constraints identified by Ridinger and Funk (2007) and its association with student attendance. The purpose of the study, therefore, was three-fold: to identify the dimensions of constraints that prevent students from attending home football games; to examine the relationship between the dimensions of constraints and student attendance; to investigate whether the selected constraint model would be appropriate in predicting attendance and/or non-attendance groups.

Data collection was coordinated through the athletic marketing department and the Dean of Students office at a major public university in the southeastern region of the United States. An e-mail was sent to all students eligible to purchase a home football ticket. A filter question was used to screen students who had attended the all home games contested to that point in the season as the study was focusing on reasons why students did not attend. As a result, of the total 3,650 respondents, 1,707 students who had attended all three home games were disregarded. The remaining respondents, 1,943, were used in the final analysis concerning constraints while 976 (50.2%) were female and 967 (49.8%) were male students. The majority of students (80%) were between the ages of 18 and 25.

The exploratory factor analysis identified a five-factor model accounting for 70.60% of the total variance of the variables. Intrapersonal constraint explained 29.95% of the variance followed by three structural constraints such as traveling difficulties (13.66%), lack of communication (12.83%), and conflicts (7.88%). Interpersonal constraint explained 6.28% of the variance. The binary logistic regression analyses suggested that students tend to be 1.92, 1.18, 1.09, and 1.41 times more likely not to attend any of the games so far this season as a result of one unit increase in lack of communication, conflicts, traveling difficulties, and intrapersonal constraints (e.g., lack of an individual’s
knowledge and interest), respectively, controlling for other constraints. But, interpersonal constraint (e.g., lack of friends or family engagement) was not a significant predictor of student attendance. The model was also better at predicting the student group who attended a game before than those who did not attend any of the games so far. Most of the attendees were predicted to attend (85%) but only 49% of non-attendees were predicted not to attend any of the games.

These findings can make up a noteworthy contribution in this line of research. It is obviously a major goal for intercollegiate athletics to cultivate prospective season ticket holders and donors, so it is important to understand why a student would choose to not attend a football game. Constraints, in essence, function as the basic theoretical framework to understand declining student attendance. In addition, this study might provide empirical evidence; supporting constraints are likely to be derived from any act of participation (Kay & Jackson, 1991), as the dimensions of constraints are closely associated with the student group who attended a game before rather than those who did not attend any of the games. Any act of previous attendance possibly relates students to constraints.