Sport team use season tickets as a means for managing their membership bases efficiently and to effectively maximize financial returns (Heath & Constantino, 2007). The delivery of season-tickets is a multi-faceted product and a wide range of variables influence consumer perceptions (Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002). Scholars have studied season ticket holders in relation to gender in determining season ticket satisfaction (Davis, McDonald, & Karg, 2010), season ticket holder churn rates (McDonald, 2010), and which season ticket holders will return (McDonald, Karg, & Leckie, 2014). However, there has been little research that helps to explain the experiences of season ticket holders. No comprehensive scale has been developed to help explain season ticket satisfaction within college sport, particularly related to season tickets holder in the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). What has been done has primarily focused in the area of professional sport (McDonald, Karg, & Vocino, 2013). This study fills the need for this gap in the literature with the purpose of exploring the experiences of season ticket holders at an institution competing in the FCS. This study is the first of two studies designed to develop a quantitative scale for measuring season ticket satisfaction in intercollegiate sport.

Literature Review

Studies of season ticket holders suggest that both club image and motives lead to higher satisfaction (Beccarini & Ferrand, 2006). Shaw and McDonald (2006) found a positive relationship between the satisfaction levels of season-ticket holders and their orientation towards club sponsors' products and brands. McDonald, Karg & Vocino (2013) sampled season ticket holders of a team that competes in Australia’s A-League and developed a 19-item scale measuring overall satisfaction with the following five constructs: service, home ground, on-field performance, club administration, and personal involvement. Other studies have also revealed why spectators attend a sport event. Findings by Greenwell, Fink, and Pastore (2002) suggest the physical elements of a sport facility help to predict customer satisfaction and play a major role in a spectator’s decision to attend a sporting event. A study by Palmeiro and Price (2015) revealed that spectators are attracted to a sporting event based on the entertainment of the event and atmosphere surrounding the facility.

Methods

A case study method was used in this study. Merriam (2009) defines case study as the study of a bounded system. For this research, the bounded system is football and men’s and women’s basketball season ticket holders at an FCS university. A total of 14 individuals (8 male, 6 female) comprised the season ticket advisory council. Two focus groups lasting between 60 to 90 minutes were conducted over the course of the Fall semester to collect data along with one final meeting in the Spring semester. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants for this study. The researchers relied on the university’s athletic department to identify a group of individuals who were serving on a Season Ticket Advisory Council. The athletic department staff dictated who participate on the council by selecting a range of participant that were diverse in terms of sport and gender. The largest number of individuals were season ticket holders for football followed by men’s and women’s basketball. Some individuals were season ticket holders for multiple sports at the university. Focus group interview transcripts were read, examined, and color-coded according to themes that emerged from the focus groups. Data analysis occurred multiple times during the study – after each of the focus groups.

Results

The results point to six primary themes that emerged from the focus groups: a) game day atmosphere; b) game day logistics; c) marketing; d) communications; e) tradition and culture; and f) community engagement. The first theme of game day atmosphere focused on topics such as issues surrounding the video and scoreboard, the band, fan attendance and enthusiasm; tailgating, customer service and staffing, parking and traffic control, traffic flow, security and event staff, and rivalry. The second theme, game day logistics, included issues surrounding the organization of
ticket gates, getting fans into the stadium prior to game time, half-time acts, music and cheerleaders. Marketing was the third theme and included topics germane to increasing attendance for students and community members, promotional giveaways, themed events, cause-related events, youth camps, bundling tickets, ticket exchange for unused tickets, and appealing to the pride and culture of the institution. The theme of Communication focused on how to effectively communicate with season ticket holders and general ideas as to how athletics is perceived from a communications perspective. Topics in this theme focused on social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc), emails from athletics, delivery of communication by on-court/field host, and communications about less known services (e.g., hospitality room). Tradition and culture were another theme. Participant comments suggested that some traditions needed to be kept, streamers as one of the only traditions, the band was not used enough for tradition, the need to paint the team mascot all over the city, how other schools have long-standing traditions, and how tradition changes after coaching changes. The final theme, community engagement, pertained to how athletics could become more engaged with the local community. Some ideas that emerged out of this theme included youth reading programs, connecting with local civic clubs, meet the player’s events, and how to get more people to attend games from outside of the area.

Discussion

Results from this study help to shed light on the experiences of a season ticket holder at an institution competing at the FCS level. While this study is part of a larger study, there are a number of theoretical and practical takeaways. From a theoretical standpoint, this initial study develops the inductive framework that will assist in developing a scale to measure season ticket holder experiences and their intent to return as a loyal ticket holder. Scale development should take into account the primary themes of game day atmosphere, game day logistics, marketing, communication, tradition and culture, and community engagement. The results of the study point to three practical implications helpful to athletic departments competing at the FCS level. First, sport marketers should take advantage of technology (e.g., videoboard focus on replays and fans, creative content). Second, it is recommended that sport marketers promote the human element (e.g., marching bands incorporation, fan acknowledgements, community relationships). The final recommendation is that sport marketers exploit traditions (e.g., allow organic traditions to develop through consistency such as team walks, songs).