Commuter Schools and Student Sense of Community: The Impact of a New On-Campus Football Stadium.

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Collegiate athletic events are one way that universities attempt to involve their students and create a stronger sense of community (SOC) among them. While students may enjoy competition and exercising their fandom, these events provide the opportunity for human gathering and interaction related to a common cause (Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012). Research suggests that the more involved students are in campus activities, the more likely they are to identify with their surroundings and experience a greater sense of community (Astin, 1984; Wiseman Gonzalez, & Salyer, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to use the theory of student involvement as a guiding framework to examine the impact of a new on-campus football stadium on student SOC at a mid-major commuter school in the southeast United States. Research shows that commuter students generally have fewer interactions with peers and faculty and participate less in campus activities and social events, leading to lower collegiate SOC (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2011). Hosting a university’s home football games in an on-campus stadium may be one way to foster SOC, while enhancing institutional values of the university (Christiansen, Greene, & Jones, 2018).

For this study, two sets of data were collected at a mid-major commuter university using an online questionnaire. Data were first collected from students prior to the start of the collegiate football season to assess perceived SOC (n=361). The second data set was collected at the conclusion of that first on-campus season (n=212). Students were asked a series of questions to measure their collegiate SOC using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree). The pre and post-stadium responses were then compared using multi-group t-test analysis. Supplemental questions were also included in the questionnaire to measure demographic and behavior items. Data analysis indicated there were no statistically significant differences found in the items measured prior to and following the first season played in the new on-campus stadium. Results suggest that while a SOC was present on campus, the introduction of an on-campus stadium did not have a strong influence on student SOC. However, findings from the supplemental questions suggest there may be some ancillary effects. For instance, more than half of the students surveyed following the season reported attending games in the new stadium and nearly half of those students stated they attended with friends. Research has shown that attending social gatherings with friends can help foster collegiate SOC on campus (Kelley & Dixon, 2011; Warner et al., 2012).

It should also be considered that the new on-campus stadium was heavily marketed prior to the season and may have influenced student SOC during the construction phase. It should also be noted that the majority of students indicated that they do not intend to give back to the university following graduation. These findings suggest further research is necessary to better understand the role that football, and playing home football games on campus, can have on the student sense of community experienced at mid-major commuter colleges and universities.