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Investing in Faculty to Improve Attendance at Collegiate Athletic Events

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Honors Project

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Introduction

Background Research

The current collegiate athletics climate thrives off the aspect of change. Student-athletes graduate, depart to play their sport professionally or may transfer from one school to another, while new talented high school athletes join the collegiate athletics fray each year and college coaches receive promotions or seek new opportunities after the conclusion of a successful campaign. Nevertheless, in this ever changing environment, one aspect seems to remain consistent; declining attendance numbers at intercollegiate athletic events. With the evolution of technology and social media, fans are progressively opting to skip the agonizing traffic, high prices and unpredictable weather in favor of cheering on their favorite team from the comfort of their own couch. Advanced camera angles and unique in-game content on standard television broadcasts make watching games at home not only a functional alternative, but also a cost-effective measure.

Interestingly enough, this attendance predicament stretches further than the market size and success of a program. Even power-five conference institutions that produce perennial contenders and postseason championships, such as the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the Big Ten Conference, have experienced fewer fans flock to their stadiums on game day. The author of a recent Wall Street Journal article addressing this downward trend reported, “Average announced attendance in football's top division [Division I] dropped for the fourth consecutive year last year, declining 7.6% in four years” (Bachman, 2018, para. 1). Moreover, a similar dip in attendance was observed in another popular college sport, as “Division I basketball saw a slight decline in attendance for the third consecutive season, but the 347 D-I teams drew more than 24.4 million fans – down some 380,000 – to 5,258 games” (Hille, 2017, para. 2). With these

reports in the minds of University athletic administrators across the nation, it is paramount to develop creative solutions to prevent attendance numbers from dwindling further.

In addition to change, a significant aspect within the collegiate athletics landscape is the consistent presence of two major groups of potential fans located right in the backyard of the institution; faculty members and students. Endless literature exists regarding the marketing efforts of collegiate athletics programs towards the latter. That said, faculty members should be targeted just as exhaustively as students in ticketing and marketing plans, as faculty members possess the ability to be an influential resource in their communities and on campus, as well as an essential piece in improving attendance numbers. A widely accepted approach to garner faculty attendance and support within athletics is to implement a ticketing program that can offer special discounts on tickets and provide additional perks to faculty and their families.

Bowling Green State University (BGSU), a mid-major school that sponsors 18 NCAA Division I varsity athletic programs, has acknowledged their shrinking crowds at athletic events by subsequently implementing a faculty, staff and retiree ticketing policy in an effort to boost attendance numbers. According to the official athletics ticketing webpage, faculty members receive one free general admission season ticket to football and volleyball, as well as the ability to purchase discounted tickets for men's basketball, women's basketball and ice hockey games. The webpage also outlines additional perks, including priority tournament tickets and discounted concession offers. Consequently, this research project was designed to illustrate why faculty ticketing programs are effective in their aim to entice faculty members to attend collegiate athletic events, so similar-sized institutions that are enduring attendance struggles can adopt this system as a model. The secondary purpose of this study was to explore the current faculty, staff

and retiree system at BGSU in order to identify areas of improvement to accommodate more individuals taking advantage of these benefits. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What motivates faculty members to attend athletic events?

RQ2: What causes faculty members to opt to not attend athletic events and take advantage of the perks associated with a faculty ticketing program?

RQ3: How can the current faculty ticketing program at BGSU be improved to indulge more faculty members?

Research Significance

In order to fully understand the severity of this attendance problem across collegiate athletics and its negative impact, it is important to demonstrate the significance of fan support in the stands as it relates to team success and student-athlete performance. In terms of team success, “Success is heavily driven by fan support, most notably in the form of home-court advantage. This season, home teams won 61.0% of conference games, which was the highest mark since 2013” (Boettger, n.d., para. 1). This demonstrates that seeing familiar faces amongst a roaring sellout crowd has a positive influence on how a team performs. Outside of team success, playing in front of a loud and rowdy crowd has a myriad of positive effects on student-athletes as well. In a study that sought to uncover student motivations for attending athletic events at Division III athletics, the researcher mentioned, “Large cheering crowds can create enduring memories for athletes” (Perrault, 2016, p. 337). Along with enduring memories, playing in front of a large crowd also has the ability to influence student-athletes’ adrenaline and motivation to play at a superior level to their competition. Overall, while athletic events could undoubtedly still be played without fans in the stands, having a strong fan support possesses indispensable benefits for student-athletes and the success of the team as a whole.

Alongside the tremendous benefits of high attendance numbers in correlating to soaring team success and student-athlete performance, there are also a number of advantages for the University. Eli Botteger of *AthleticDirectorU*, an online resource devoted to empowering collegiate athletics, mentioned, “Home attendance numbers not only have an impact on winning and losing games, but also producing revenue that can elevate programs nationwide” (Boettger, n.d., para. 2). The revenue generated from ticket sales, along with the auxiliary revenue from concessions, parking fees, and souvenirs, can bless the University with the purchasing power to acquire new equipment for student-athletes, renovate workout and practice facilities and provide more development opportunities, academically, professionally and athletically, to student-athletes and coaches. Moreover, experiencing an invigorating environment at athletic events is instrumental for the institution in attracting student-athlete recruits and prospective students to their program.

Finally, before embarking on this study, it is imperative to understand the importance and influence faculty members can hold within intercollegiate athletics. University faculty spend an inordinate amount of time on campus; this may include teaching and lecturing, engaging in research, meeting with students in open office hours and/or overseeing on-campus student organizations. On top of this, many reside in or around the communities of the institution they work. This enables faculty to transform into advocates of the University. Faculty may share their experiences with the colleagues, friends, neighbors, current students and prospective students they come into contact with daily. This word-of-mouth communication can be a driving force in influencing others to attend athletic events at their institution. However, for this advocacy to extend to occur, faculty must be invited to the table. In a study polling 2,000 faculty members at Division I-A institutions regarding the role they would like to play within athletics, it was

discovered that, “A striking number of faculty members feel disconnected from intercollegiate athletics” (Sander, 2007, para. 7). Considering the vital role faculty play in teaching student-athletes, along with the referent power they possess, it is time for institutions across the nation to embrace and invest time and resources into this invaluable group of individuals on campus as an approach to improve attendance at athletic events.

Methods

Participants

A total of 90 active and retired BGSU faculty members participated in this study (30 men, 60 women), with respondents representing each academic college at BGSU. More specifically, 31 participants represented the College of Arts and Sciences, 19 from the College of Education and Human Development, nine from the College Health and Human Services, eight from miscellaneous academic departments (e.g., University Libraries), seven from the College of Business, three from both the Graduate College and College of Musical Arts, two from BGSU Firelands (a satellite college connected to BGSU), and one from both the Honors College and the College of Technology, Architecture and Applied Engineering. Notably, all respondents disclosed they live in Ohio, with 55 reporting they reside in Bowling Green, Ohio. This study was open to all BGSU faculty members, active and retired, that have opted to receive emails from the official University faculty listserv.

Instrumentation

To accurately garner the opinions, perceptions and experiences of faculty members regarding the faculty, staff and retiree ticketing system in place at BGSU, as well as to discover motivations for attending athletic events, a questionnaire was developed. This questionnaire included four demographic questions, targeted towards finding out how close faculty are to

campus, as well as what academic department they work in. This information is beneficial to segment the results to see how distance from campus affects involvement in athletics, as well as to identify potential trends in the data based on academic department. Following the four demographic questions, seven quantitative questions make up the heart of the questionnaire.

The first four questions in this substantive section were developed in order to get a more straightforward idea of what benefits and perks motivate faculty members to attend athletic events, along with exploring the factors faculty members may opt to not attend athletic events. Moreover, the final three quantitative questions were designed to convey how discounted and/or free tickets to athletic events are influential in motivating faculty to attend athletic events. The questionnaire concludes with one qualitative question that permits participants to evaluate the current faculty ticketing program and confidently share their prior experiences and involvement with BGSU athletics. From this feedback, ideas could be orchestrated and subsequently presented to University athletic administrators for potential implementation to strengthen and positively grow the current policies in place.

Procedure

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board and the Office of Research Compliance at BGSU, the aforementioned questionnaire was digitized and disseminated to current and retired faculty members by Dr. Amanda Paule-Koba, Associate Professor of Sport Management at BGSU and the primary faculty advisor for this project, through the faculty email listserv operated and maintained by the University. In short, this listserv is an email chain that includes all current and retired BGSU faculty members, but individuals linked into this database have the ability to opt out and unsubscribe at any time. Before participating in the questionnaire,

respondents had to first read through and agree to the purpose, risks and benefits of the study in order to officially consent to participate.

Once issuing their consent and acknowledgment of the risks and benefits associated with the study, participants were prompted to answer the 12 survey questions surrounding their experiences attending athletic events, comprised of four demographic questions, seven qualitative questions, and one quantitative question. This being said, this study was voluntary, meaning respondents could start and stop filling out questions at any point. The digitized questionnaire was active for a period of two weeks. After the two-week response period concluded, all responses were collected and compiled in order to be analyzed for trends and themes.

Results and Discussion

The first portion of the questionnaire revealed the factors that motivate faculty members to attend athletic events, as well as unearthed the circumstances that lead them to bypass attending athletic events. In terms of what elements make faculty more obligated to attend athletic events, the top response selected was the *desire to see their students play* (28.48%), followed by *other* (26.49%), *promotions and giveaways* (15.23%), *family-friendly atmosphere* (15.23%), *priority seating* (12.58%) and *discounted concessions* (1.99%). The top write-in responses provided by faculty in the *other* option included enjoyment of the sport, attending with friends or colleagues and wanting to take advantage of the free ticket provided by the BGSU ticket office. Regarding what circumstances lead faculty to opt not to attend athletic events, the top response was the write-in *other* option (30.99%), followed by *date/time of athletic event* (24.65%), *have no interest in athletics* (13.38%), *weather* (12.68%), *live too far away* (11.97%), *do not know when/where events are* (4.23%) and *location of facilities from campus* (2.11%). In

the *other* section, faculty cited high ticket costs when buying for family and friends, having nobody to attend with and a lack of free time outside of their responsibilities as faculty members as reasons they do not currently attend athletic events.

Succeeding this section were questions targeted at demonstrating how persuasive faculty ticketing programs can be in motivating faculty to attend athletic events. Utilizing Likert-scale questions (i.e., *greatly increase* to *greatly decrease* answer choices), faculty were asked if their interest in attending events would increase or decrease as a result of being offered discounted tickets for their family or friends. Correspondingly, 16.09% of faculty reported their interest would *greatly increase*, while 68.97% stated their interest would increase at least slightly. Furthermore, when asked how their interest would fluctuate given free tickets for themselves and their families, 37.93% of faculty reported their interest would *greatly increase*, while 74.71% declared their interest would increase at least slightly.

While it can be deduced that offering faculty members free tickets would be instrumental in encouraging them to attend athletic events and bring along their family and friends, these offerings could be a major financial burden for any sized institution. As a result, faculty members were next asked to report, on average, how much they spend at athletic events on common forms of auxiliary athletics revenue. Overall, participants reported they spent an average of \$23.53 on concessions, \$12.08 on souvenirs, \$12.95 on parking, and \$4.21 on promotional contests (e.g., 50/50 raffles, chuck-a-puck games), totaling \$58.90 of ancillary revenue to the department. These figures can be viewed as a justification to offset the financial challenge of extending free tickets to faculty members and their families.

The concluding qualitative question of the survey featured the most revealing and compelling data. Respondents were allowed to freely express their perceptions of, and previous

experiences with, the faculty, staff and retiree ticketing program at BGSU. Accordingly, the following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Cost is King

While faculty were exceedingly grateful for the free ticket for themselves, as well as the additional perks offered by the ticket office, this section of the study was littered with passionate comments regarding how expensive it can become to bring along friends and family to athletic events. One participant stated, “I would attend more events if my family could get discounted tickets. We are a family of 5 and it gets expensive.” Parking was another deciding factor for faculty, as one respondent expressed, “Having to pay for parking is frustrating since I already pay for a parking pass for the year.” Possible remedies to address the financial concerns of participants would be pioneering special promotional games throughout the year, such as “Bring a Friend for Free Night” or “\$5 Faculty Family Night.” Moreover, with a majority of students absent from campus and the workload on faculty lightened during Winter Session, special discounts and promotions can also be extended to faculty members and their families to attract a stronger crowd at athletic events during this term.

Theme 2: Athletic Events Are Social Events

In addition to inflated costs to bring family and friends functioning as a shared reason to not attend athletic events among faculty, participants also frequently mentioned their resistance to attending athletic events alone. One participant noted, “I really would like to attend more events, but it’s not as fun without friends.” However, a number of faculty members stated that their colleagues’ attendance at athletic events does influence their likelihood to attend athletic events, with one respondent adding, “I can only think of one time my coworkers who generally are uninterested in athletics showed up for a game, and that was when our department was

featured at halftime in a football game.” In order to capitalize on this sentiment, implementing a “Faculty Challenge,” where the academic department or college with the most faculty attendees per game receive a reward for their department, could certainly catch the attention of department chairs and subsequently prompt their entire department to attend athletic events together in the spirit of friendly competition, thus eliminating the apprehension of having to attend athletic events alone.

Theme 3: Lack of Awareness

While the costs associated with bringing guests and the unwillingness to attend athletic events by themselves were expected conclusions of this study, arguably the most surprising result was that an overwhelming amount of participants were not aware these benefits existed or knew how to claim them. One participant expressed, “I did not even know this existed. I would have probably used both the free and the discounted tickets had I known.” On the topic of claiming these perks, one faculty member stated, “I looked for a faculty discount [when purchasing tickets online] and could not find an option for such a discount.” That said, it is important to note that a limitation that leads to this lack of awareness is the fact that University policies prohibits the BGSU ticket office, as well as BGSU athletics as whole, from directly communicating with faculty. However, engaging in meaningful discourse with University administrators in order to permit the one-time distribution of a faculty newsletter to faculty members through campus mail at the beginning of each academic year could confidently quell this trend and effectively lead more faculty members to contribute in creating a winning atmosphere at athletic events.

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