

Student Attendance At Campus Sporting Events: How Can We Get Them There?

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ABSTRACT

College student attendance at campus sporting events has been declining for a number of years with administrators looking for ways to reverse that trend. There are multiple reasons for the declining attendance and a multitude of possible solutions have been proposed. This case examines the situation for the football program at one mid-sized university, providing data from a representative cross section of the student population. Readers are tasked with making recommendations based on the data and to describe methods of evaluating the success of any changes.

Keywords: Student Attendance; Sporting Event; Campus; College Student

Suggested Courses for the Case: Marketing Management and Strategy; Marketing Research; Sports Marketing; Sports Management; Consumer Behavior; Strategic Management

INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUE

ollege student attendance at sporting events on their campus has been declining, and athletic directors across the country are looking for ways to get more students in the stadium (Fullerton, 2017; Southorn, 2017; Sullivan, 2017; Cohen & Bachman, 2014). This is important as the students are the next generation of season ticket holders. The universities also rely on the students, once they become alumni, for donations to help support the teams (New 2014).

While this is creating a problem for the future, it also impacts current college budgets. Many universities rely on the revenues from the athletic program to not only fund athletics but also provide income and resources to the university, so a decline in attendance hurts the university as a whole (Davis, 2015).

The first step in getting more college students at games is discovering why they are not attending. As Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione notes, “Interests and attitudes are changing so rapidly, it’s not easy to quickly identify what we need to do” (Rovell, 2014). One of the most often-quoted potential reasons for lack of attendance is the increasing convenience of simply watching the game at home (Rishe, 2015). With the ability to watch multiple games in HD TV with no long lines to get food that is “over-priced,” some students may be failing to find the benefits of going to a game in person (Rovell, 2014). While some schools do get money from TV deals, they are also losing money on ticket sales (Solomon, 2014). Quality of the opponent as well as whether the opponent is a key rival can impact attendance (Duffey, 2013). A number of schools have also identified the lack of quality cell phone and Wi-Fi service in the stadiums/arenas as potential concerns (Rittenberg, 2014). In some instances, such as at Auburn, the school’s coordination of block seating for organizations is leading to unhappy students. The strict rules that go along with the block seating, such as being there one hour before and remaining for the entire game, may actually be discouraging students from wanting to attend (Tully, 2015). Students have also identified timing of the game, cost, weather, and traffic as deterrents (Grosbard, 2017; Hansen, 2017; Rishe, 2015).

Schools have tried a number of initiatives to get more students to the stadiums. For example, the Big Ten Conference has revised its in-stadium replay rules so that instead of just showing one or two replays, schools can show as many as they like and at slower speeds to mimic what one would view at home (Rittenberg, 2014). Some schools have also begun to attempt to provide fast, free Wi-Fi throughout their entire stadium, although this can be cost prohibitive. Colleges have also begun to implement live feeds and updates of other college football games at stadiums (Rittenberg,

2014). Purdue has seen an increase in attendance of nearly 20%, which they credit to a decrease in student ticket prices (Miller, 2015). In cases such as Texas A&M, a new stadium was built to get students excited about a new environment (Davis, 2015). Schools like TCU (Texas Christian University) have begun to focus more on the experience than the amenities through studying the Disney Institute. Colleges are using a similar approach by creating more fan interaction and a more positive experience as a whole (Solomon, 2015). Other universities, like the University of Miami, have moved the student sections to better positions relative to the field (Rovell, 2014). Some schools are starting to create rewards programs to encourage student attendance. For example, Kansas State developed a student attendance reward program in which students gained points by attending home games. The points earned determined the student's ability to purchase tickets for the season's most sought-after home game. The promotion, however, was not successful, as other motivational factors, such as connection with the team, social aspects of attending, the level of competition, were found to be more important to students (Peetz, 2011). Finally, schools have begun to sell alcohol at games. To combat potential downsides, the University of Texas, among others, uses the high prices of alcohol as an attempt to discourage overconsumption by students (Tracey, 2015).

A Case Example: University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD)

UMD is a mid-sized (12,000 students) upper Midwestern university offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Due to modest enrollment declines, campus budgets have been slightly tightened. As a result, athletics has been tasked with increasing overall revenues and student engagement (both as a recruitment tool for prospective UMD students and as a retention tool to help keep UMD students enrolled and complete their degrees). Given budget tightening, there is very little money for new spending on fan engagement for football.

A total of five home football games are played each year. Early in the season, these tend to be Thursday or Saturday evening (the hours can vary), but later in the season, the last two games are played early Saturday afternoon.

Over the last several years, student interest in football games at UMD has been declining, and the school would like to understand why and determine how to reverse the trend. UMD conducted an online survey of 316 current undergraduate and graduate students, selected via a stratified sample technique. Students were provided anonymity, and attributes found by Ferreira and Armstrong (2004) to be important in influencing college students to attend college sports were included in the survey.

GENERAL RESULTS

Some of the most informative findings are reported here. The full database, accessible in both Excel and SPSS, which can be used to run additional analysis and crosstabulations, can be found here: <https://z.umn.edu/3fsu>

Table 1. Number of Games Attended Last Season

Games Attended (out of 5)	Percentage of Students
None	35
1	28
2	16
3	10
4	5
5	6

Table 2. Top Factors Identified as “Very Important” or “Critical” for Student Attendance at Football Games

Issue	Percentage of students who identified this as “Very Important” or “Critical”
Food price	60
Food quality	56
Restroom cleanliness	51
Time of day game is played	50
Quality of the stadium sound system	48

Scale points for these questions were not important, somewhat important, very important, and critical.

Table 3. Top Factors Identified as “Not Important” for Student Attendance at Football Games

Issue	Percentage of students who identified this as “Not Important”
Strength of Wi-Fi signal	63
Post-game traffic	55
Pre-game traffic	53
Availability of alcohol	50
The team enters the stadium, pregame, through an aisle of students	44

Scale points for these questions were not important, somewhat important, very important, and critical

Table 4. Methods that Students Use to Stay Informed About UMD Football Games

Method	Percentage of students
Email	25
UMD athletics’ webpage	24
Twitter	24
Facebook	19
UMD pocket schedule	14

Question allowed multiple responses.

Table 5. Top Reasons Students Do Not Attend More UMD Football Games

Reason	Percentage of students
Weather	49
Game time conflicts with personal schedule	47
I prefer rivalry games or big match ups	37
Atmosphere of the game	20
Concessions are too expensive	18

Question allowed multiple responses.

Table 6. What Would Motivate Students to Attend More UMD Football Games

Issue	Percentage of students
Increase size of student section	31
Create new school traditions/cheers	28
Rewards programs	26
Promotional giveaways	25
More in-game entertainment	24
Better weather conditions	22

Question allowed multiple responses.

Table 7. Net Promoter Score: Student Responses to “How Likely is it that You Would Recommend a UMD Football Game to a Friend?”

Net Promoter Grouping	Percentage of students
Detractors (scored 0-6)	66
Passives (scored 7-8)	26
Promoters (scored 9-10)	8

Possible answers are 0-10, with 0=Not at all likely, 5=Neutral, 10=Extremely likely. The categorization and labels shown here (e.g., Detractors, etc.) are commonly used in the industry (“What is Net Promoter?”, 2017). The Net Promoter Score (which can range from a low of -100 to a high of 100), defined as % promoters minus % detractors, for UMD Football is -58.

Table 8. Sports Fan Segments of Student Respondents (of those who attend games)

Segment	Percentage of students
Socialites (go to be with friends)	57
Patriot (proud of school)	17
Appreciator (watch athletic skills)	12
Player (used to play football myself)	12
Looker (watch attractive people)	2

For information on these segments see Fullerton (2017)

Males Compared with Females

Cross-tabulation analyses were performed of males versus females to compare results. Only statistically significant differences are reported here and in subsequent sections of this case. Males and females attended very similar percentages of games. However, 49% of females credited attending games to the social aspect compared to 34% of males. A little over 13% of males claimed the availability of alcohol was critical, compared to 3% of females. The location of the alcohol tent was critical to 19% of males as compared to 5% of females. For males, 41% found promotional giveaways to be of no importance, compared to 33% of females. When ranking importance of tailgating, only 9% of females claimed tailgating to be critical, as compared to 17% for males. A total of 47% of females considered food selection very important or critical, while 37% of males thought the same. Females found restroom cleanliness to be very important (46%) compared to males (34%). Males were also more interested in having cheerleaders at games compared to females (51% vs. 24%).

Underclassmen Compared with Lowerclassmen

The responses of upperclassmen (juniors and seniors) were compared to lowerclassmen (freshman and sophomores). A total of 46% of lowerclassmen credited the social aspect of games as their reason for attending football games compared to 32% of upperclassmen. Upperclassmen are more likely to *not* attend football games (38% vs. 26% of lowerclassmen). Not surprisingly, given the legal drinking age, 59% of lowerclassmen considered alcohol availability as *not* important, as compared to 35% of upperclassmen.

On-Campus Students Compared with Students Who Live Off-Campus

A full 38% of students who live off-campus said they do not attend UMD home football games, compared to 21% of students who live on-campus. About 58% of on-campus students deemed the availability of alcohol as *not* important. About 56% of on-campus students consider availability of parking to be “not important,” compared to 33% of off-campus students. Off-campus students also felt that traffic before and after games was an important consideration when deciding to attend a football game.

CASE QUESTIONS

1. What recommendations would you make for increasing the number of students at football games at UMD?
2. Compare the Net Promoter Score (NPS) for this Football program with other NPS scores shown in your textbook or by using a web search.
3. The data provided in this case came from a survey of selected students. What other marketing research tools might be used to learn more about student preferences and experiences as fans at college football games?
4. Assume you make changes to the football games to try and increase fan interest and attendance. How would you assess whether the changes are having a positive impact on fans?

TEACHING NOTES

Teaching notes, including notations of what UMD actually adopted, are available from the senior author.

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