Examining Declining Student Attendance at College Football Games

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Introduction & Background

It's fourth quarter and the tension is high in the stadium as your college's football team is tied up at the 40-yard line. The band has the crowd stimulated with the school's fight song, while the sea of pompoms across the stadium is simultaneously pulsing to the beat. The student section seems to be overflowing with every student full of eustress as they watch their team set up for what could be a winning or losing play. The ball is snapped and in a matter of seconds the commentator yells, "The pass is complete!" "And he is off! He can't be stopped! Down to the 20, 15, 10! Touchdown!" The student section goes wild.

Is this moment familiar? For most people this moment is priceless, yet in recent years this has not been the experience many students choose to enjoy. In 2014, major college football home attendance dipped to its lowest average in 14 years (Solomon, 2014b) with student attendance down seven percent since 2009 (Smith, 2015). Why are attendance rates dropping and what is keeping students from choosing the in-game experience? Are certain football conferences experiencing this attendance decline more than others, and what is being done to resolve the issue? Athletic directors across the country are being faced with these questions and are searching for ways to not only entice their students to fill their student sections but also for methods to keep them engaged longer.

According to UGA athletic director Greg McGarity, "Back in the day, going to a football game used to be the biggest thing you did in the fall" (Solomon, 2014a). Nothing compared to watching a football game live. However, we have seen a shift to commercialized sports recently, which alters the control of power, the atmosphere, and viewing of college football games. "Spectator interest in commercial sports is based on a combination of a quest for excitement, ideologies emphasizing success, the existence of youth sport programs, and media coverage…"

(Coakley, 2015, p. 385). Due to this, in recent years, students have found cheaper, more

convenient, stimulating ways to watch their school's team play. The University of Michigan

drew the most fans of any school in 2014 for the 16th year in a row, yet they still had a student

no-show rate of 26% (Rovell, 2014). This was a 5% increase from 2011 (Rovell, 2014).

Although some schools are experiencing larger decreases than others when it comes to

attendance rates—such as the University of Kansas which had 74% of student tickets go unused

last season (Cohen, 2014)—the struggle to get students in the stadium gates is a unanimous

concern across all of college football. Even the SEC's student attendance rates are declining.

Georgia's Sanford Stadium has a student section of about 18,000 seats, and between 2009 and

2012 the number of seats filled by UGA students never exceeded 15,000 (Cohen, 2013). Why is

this? A first thought might be that students only enjoy attending games when their team is highly

favored. However, that does not explain why even the University of Alabama had 32% of

student seats go unused between 2009 and 2012, a period in which they won three national

championships (Cohen, 2013). Many believe, "[t]he growing number of empty seats in student

sections across the U.S. is a sign of soaring ticket prices, more lopsided games, and fewer

matchups against longtime rivals, and the proliferation of televised games that make it easier

than ever for students to keep tailgating long after kickoff" (Cohen, 2014).

    In response to this new and concerning issue, the SEC formed a committee in 2012

committed to studying fan experiences (Cohen, 2014). All 14 schools in the conference have

made improvements since then, including better cellular reception at The University of Georgia

as well as cleaner restrooms and an improved sound system at Louisiana State University

(Cohen, 2014). Each school troubled by attendance declines has found their own unique ways to

help fill their empty seats. Auburn has created an entire weekend experience around game day,

which includes locker-room tours, meals on the field the night before, better food choices at their concessions, and additional parking and tailgating spots (Solomon, 2014a). Other schools have become creative in smaller ways such as Arizona State requiring game day staff to wear fun name tags and say hello and goodbye to fans (Solomon, 2014a). While some schools, such as UGA, have simply just cut back on the number of student tickets available by distributing more to alumni (Cohen, 2013). So why is it that schools are being forced to find new ways to entice their students to show up to football games? What alternatives do students prefer over the in-game experience?

How could any student prefer watching their team play anywhere but in their home stadium? College football is one of the most exciting events in the world of sports. The atmosphere on game day at any college campus is incomparable. The hype surrounding each football Saturday is unexplainable. Schools are getting large amounts of revenue from college football alone. However, as the commercialization of sports increases and "forces more established sports to make action more exciting and understandable for spectators" (Coakley, 2015, p. 362), students are looking for more excitement and alternate viewing options. So what exactly is pulling students away from in-stadium viewing of college football games? What is keeping students from experiencing the atmosphere of the stadium and being able to root for their team in person?

Reasons for Student Attendance Decline

Reasons why students do not want to attend games anymore range from dissatisfaction of game matchups to preferring better viewing alternatives. The two most popular reasons for less student attendance are higher ticket prices and less interesting games (Tuttle, 2014). The attendance slide has also been blamed on an increase in student ticket prices (Cohen, 2014).

Michael Proppe, a Michigan student who was student-body president last year, said, "[t]here are students who are being priced out. People are looking to trim costs, and for a lot of folks, football is an easy thing to cut out. It's not essential to going to college" (Cohen, 2014). Ticket prices have continued to increase while the quality of the product has gone down, so it is no surprise that students would rather stay home and watch the game on their televisions (Tuttle, 2014). Some students would rather continue tailgating and watch their game on TV than have to worry about getting into the game and finding a decent spot in the student section. Some of the most common complaints included restrictions on tailgating and breaks in the action in stadiums (Rovell, 2014). These complaints are heightened when students could achieve better viewing quality on TV and continuing tailgating longer. The convenience of watching the game elsewhere outweighs the inconvenience students experience watching the game in the stadium. Some students suggested that their school's student sections were in terrible spots, and this is supported by the fact that many schools began moving student sections into some of the worst seats in order to make boosters happier (Rovell, 2014).

Obviously, another contributing factor is how well a team is performing. More students are likely to come if their team is undefeated than if their team is performing poorly. Weather is an additional factor that has a great impact on student attendance, whether it is in the North's cold or the South's heat. "While game time, opponent, promotion and record all have some effect, weather has had the most direct effect on our student crowd," said Jeff Garner, Penn State's assistant athletic director for ticketing sales and service (Rovell, 2014). Students in today's age are different from students in history. "There is a different demographic out there that we're fighting for their attention and their loyalty. And we've got to reach them," said

Michigan athletic director (Solomon, 2014a). Whether the school is in the North or in the South, college football student attendance is a unanimous concern for a majority of schools.

However, there are many students who still attend home games. What draws these students to the games, though? According to psychologist Dan Wann, who created the Sports Fan Identification Scale, fans have eight basic motives that drive them to consume sports. These eight reasons include entertainment, escape, economics, eustress, aesthetic, family, self-esteem, and group affiliation (King, 2004). "Not all the motives that Wann identified are present at all times for all fans. Family and economics, for example, may come and go. But most are present in degrees that vary from person to person" (King, 2004). Since these motives vary from person to person, each student's motive for actually attending a game varies. However, if the motives are high enough and positive enough, students will show up in support of their team. There are many perks for showing up to a school's home stadium. The excitement and atmosphere that games promote create some of the most extraordinary, memorable experiences. Watching the game on television often does not do it justice. Watching on TV does not show how loud and intense the game actually is, thus leaving out a huge component of college football. There are reasons for students to come to games and reasons for them not to attend. Schools just have to make sure students' motives for attending outweigh their motives for staying at home.

Media Impact on Declining Student Attendance Rates

While convenience of watching a game on TV, staying with friends at a more spacious tailgate, and other reasons contribute to the decline in student attendance, how much of the decline comes from media's affect? This can be difficult to measure because, according to Coakley:

> "[M]any people say that they would rather watch certain sport events on television than attend them in person. On the other hand, the media publicize sports, promote interest,

and provide information that helps people to identify with athletes and teams and become potential ticket purchasers for events" (Coakley, 2015, p. 422).

Media coverage has increased how many games are covered, and new media has allowed fans to stay connected to the game, social conversations, and instant updates simultaneously. With more game coverage and more ways to connect, it is easy for students to choose alternate viewing options. The transformation of media has allowed students to connect with other fans, follow up on social media platforms, identify scores and stats, and play online games (Coakley, 2015). For example, ESPN has expanded from not only broadcasting events but also providing fans with branded television, web, and mobile platforms which allow fans to stay connected and have 24-7 access to sports information (Coakley, 2015).

All these viewing options and social interactions encourage students to stay at home or watch from an alternate viewing location so that they can stay up-to-date on every aspect of what goes on in the entire realm of college football. Coakley states that, "[m]edia sports provide topics of conversation, occasions for social interaction, a sense of belonging and identity, opportunities to express emotion and an exciting distraction for those who are passing time alone" (Coakley, 2015, p. 419). All these factors combine together to make in stadium support of a student's favorite team less appealing. "Television coverage has become so seamless in its representations of sports that we often define televised games as "real" games" (Coakley, 2015, p. 393). With a generation of students that are more connected online and to the media, this seamless representation definitely affects students' decisions on whether to support their team from within its stadium or elsewhere.

Social Worlds Impacted by Declining Student Attendance Rates

This decline in student attendance does not only affect schools, but it also affects other fans, coaches, players, and students. When looking at the ramifications for the decline in

attendance, it is essential to consider social world effects on students, players, teams, and non-student fans such as alumni.

Emily Golembiewski, an AECOM researcher and analyst, said in an article on Sports Business Daily, "[a]ctually students want the in-person experience, the social experience. They want to be around other people" (Smith, 2015). College students are in their peak years of social interaction, which could easily influence their decision-making processes when deciding whether or not to attend a football game. The University of Texas (Texas) sent out a survey to students to get an idea of what would influence them to have an increased desire to attend games. In response to the survey, students asked for gathering places within the stadium that have an "Austin" feel (Smith, 2015). In other words, students want multiple environments for socialization when viewing the game. Students' social worlds are an extremely important factor in decision-making. Students want to socialize, feel accepted, and feel they have a sense of group-affiliation. This desire drives them to view their college football game wherever they experience the most socialization. The decline in attendance at college football games affects students by pulling them away from in-stadium viewing to other alternatives with more socially desirable atmospheres.

Another explanation for the decline in student attendance at college football games is the establishment of cultural standards or traditions. If the university's culture or tradition is to attend any and all football home games, then students will more likely attend just to follow the status quo. In a study done by D. Randall Smith, Smith explains that, "one thread in the justification of big-time sports is that college athletics are part of the college experience" (2009, p. 558). Smith continues to talk about how this "college experience" relates to alumni, in which he determines that the college football games are an outlet to remain connected to the culture

surrounding their alma mater (2009). When student attendance declines, alumni lose that sense

of a college experience they once knew. Fewer students in the student sections make the stadium

look emptier, sound quieter, and ultimately hurts the overall atmosphere of the game. Without

that student feel, alumni and fans that were never affiliated with the school are deprived of

experiencing the current college culture (Smith, 2009).

      Secondly, how are the players affected by the decline? This can be rephrased to ask: how

important is home field advantage? The players' social world changes when they feel that they

have the support of their peers. Caudill and Mixon examined the correlation between relative fan

attendance and the probability of winning a college football game (2007). They focused on the

Alabama-Auburn game, and found that "[t]he probability of an Alabama victory declines as the

relative number of Auburn fans in attendance increases" (Caudill & Mixon, 2007, p. 753).

Needless to say, the players' performance and interactions with each other thrive off the

spectators, while the spectators also thrive off the performance of the teams' players. Fewer

students, or fewer fans in general, negatively affects a team's home field advantage and

ultimately hurts the game itself. These interactions affect each other, and the decline in student

attendance negatively impacts the atmosphere, the experience, the game, and the social worlds of

everyone involved.

Current Trends & Future Developments

      As discussed above, current trends in combating the steep decline in college football

student attendance includes updating the amenities in a stadium, rewarding students for showing

up to games, and redesigning the way tickets are distributed to students. Adding new video

boards, sound systems, and renovating restrooms are all examples of recent measures universities

have taken for attracting and retaining more in-stadium fans (Cohen, 2014). Although these

features are important when it comes to modernizing stadiums and attracting more fans, college sport administrators are increasingly concerned with the cellular and Wi-Fi capabilities of their stadiums, and they insist that more connectivity will lead to a boost in attendance among students (Rovell, 2014).

In an effort to increase attendance numbers, colleges and universities have also implemented various strategies for rewarding students that attend football games. Some examples of this include the University of Oregon offering students who stay for the duration of high scoring games free Jack in the Box hamburgers (Cohen, 2013), and the University of Arizona awarding students cash prizes that can only be claimed at game's conclusion (Rovell, 2014). These approaches not only provide students some outside motivation for attending games from the start, but they also focus on keeping students engaged and in the stadium for the entire duration of the game. Contrasting these efforts to incentivize attendance at college football games, some colleges and universities have taken an alternative approach by actually punishing students that fail to show up. One example of this is the University of Alabama "suspend[ing] the priority block seating of 20 student organizations...citing its guidelines which mention that those in the reserved sections can have their privileges revoked due to 'early departure from the stadium'" (Rovell, 2014). Although this an extreme example, university policies aimed at increasing student attendance emphasize rewarding students who attend games and penalizing those who do not.

Another notable policy trend pertaining to student attendance involves redesigning ticket distribution. In an effort to encourage fan retention, The University of Michigan (Michigan) has instituted the practice of "assign[ing] seats to students based on how many sports games they attended the previous school year" (Cohen, 2014). This policy's goal is to encourage students to

attend more games year round, ensuring that students who truly want tickets will have access to

those sections of the stadium vital to creating a positive atmosphere. Michigan also offers

discounted single-game student tickets with the hopes of attracting those students who would

rather attend a few games rather than committing to the entire season (Cohen, 2014). Both of

these measures exemplify current trends present throughout college football, and they represent

steps that school administrators across the nation have implemented in an attempt to increase

student attendance.

While the current trends in boosting attendance are prevalent in college football, recent

research reveals that future trends must shift if they are to possess any significant effects. An

area that may be receiving more attention than is warranted is the emphasis for in-stadium

cellular and Wi-Fi connectivity. According to the aforementioned Golembiewski study, "the at-

home viewing experience and the lack of Wi-Fi...weren't the impediments to attendance once

thought" (Smith, 2015). Instead, measures should be taken to promote the social experience that

comes with attending college football games because that is the primary reason that students

choose to attend games, rather than watching them on television (Smith, 2015). Texas responded

to Golembiewski's findings by creating an in-stadium "fan fest" area that opens four hours

before kickoff and includes local food trucks, live music, and an open gathering space for

students (Smith, 2015). This area not only encourages students to arrive early for games, but it

also provides a social environment with entertainment prior to games.

In an effort to improve the social experiences for students at college football games,

future expectations should include a student section shift from reserved seating to general

admission. Golembiewski insists that fans should be allowed to enjoy sporting events in various

ways. For socially-driven students, this includes "general admission seating sections, or sections

without seats that would allow students to wander and mingle" (Smith, 2015). This promotes an

atmosphere of comradery among students, encouraging them to attend for more than the game.

Students are afforded the freedom to create individual experiences that are essential for

attendance retention (Smith, 2015). Taking the concept of creating social experiences further,

Golembiewski discusses "identity, social connection, meaningful affiliation, fun, social sharing,

and excitement" that appeal to students when it pertains to live sporting events (Smith, 2015).

When these items are not offered at college football games, student interest wains, negatively

affecting attendance. For this reason, she maintains that "more than [offering] giveaways or

promotions, millennials want their teams to provide access to players, coaches and the field"

(Smith, 2015). Administrators of college football games should use this research to foster

meaningful relationships between teams and students, utilizing college football games as sites for

significant social experience.

Perceived Implications & Opposing Perspective

Because the decline in student attendance rates influences the success of college football

programs, many colleges have devoted time and resources to develop policies and strategies

similar to those outlined above. This decline has both management and social world implications

that stem largely from the idea of "school spirit" and that "being a part of any group or

organization is more enjoyable when people have opportunities to collectively express their

feelings" (Coakley, 2015, p. 482). Because college football games embody this idea of school

spirit, it means that "considerable resources in the form of time, energy, and money are devoted

to producing this outcome in connection with sports" (Coakley, 2015, p. 482). This is evident

within the context of this paper because numerous research studies have been conducted and

monetary resources have been devoted to finding ways to remedy the issue of declining student

attendance rates at college football games. Although this is a large problem within the specific realm of college sports, the issue can be presented in a broader social context on college campuses. The policies aimed at increasing attendance for sporting events could also be used to increase attendance in other spheres of social experience on college campuses that lack participation—such as classes, academic events, clubs, and organizations. Coakley summarizes this idea by stating that the time, energy, and money focused on sports could instead be used "to create curricula, engage in well-planned course projects, maintain classrooms and laboratories, train and pay teachers, reward students for academic accomplishments, and present the school as a valuable learning site to the entire community" (2015, p. 483). The controversial emphasis on finding a remedy for decreasing attendance at college football games is yet another example of the Great Sport Myth because it "undermines thinking about how school spirit might be more effectively organized around something other than sport teams" (Coakley, 2015, p. 483).

Strategies & Recommendations for Improvement

Taking these current and future trends into account, we have developed several suggestions for how colleges and universities could improve student attendance rates at college football games. In attempt to create the social experience that Golembiewski outlined, colleges should focus on marketing games' social aspects instead of simply depending on the on-field matchup. Achieving this could be done in a numerous ways, including creating "fan fests"—such as the previously discussed Texas example in which students are incentivized to arrive early for games. We also recommend that universities change student section seating policies from reserved seating to general admission seating; enabling students to have a flexible socialization environment. If possible, we would further expand this flexible socialization environment by

creating non-seating sections where students can eat, drink, and mingle—all while still viewing the game.

Current technologies could be implemented to encourage social interaction at college football games as well. Most stadiums are already undergoing updates to their cellular connectivity and Wi-Fi capabilities, so we would use that to build an even stronger social experience for students by creating a mobile application. Similar to others already implemented in the sport industry, this application would include features such as instant replay, seat upgrades, customer feedback, social media integration, and more (Solomon, 2014b). The application would also be used for real-time engagement throughout the course of the game, so that fans could request songs and videos to be played and view social media posts on-screen. Not only would this create an engaging atmosphere to keep students involved during breaks in game action, but it would also utilize social media to create links between peers, thus adding to the overall social experience that students desire.

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