

The Influence of Athletics on University Branding: Through the Lens of Key Stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

Institutional branding has become a critical activity for universities across the nation. The brand of a university is its unique identity that consists of items such as its name, logo, symbol, slogan and much more. Athletics is one of the many factors that contributes to university branding. Universities often have multiple identities that make up their brand, but there are two in particular that are the strongest, the academic identity and the athletic identity (Gonzenbach & Watkins, 2013). Intercollegiate athletics has cemented its role as an integral piece in present day American society. A successful athletic program can garner national media attention and visibility for its university. From a communication perspective, a brand is the institution's way of telling their story, and university athletic departments are full of inspiring and impactful stories (Aurand, Gorchels, Gordon & Judson, 2009).

In this study, we examine the influence of athletics on the overall brand of a university among multiple stakeholders. Three groups were identified as key stakeholders: students, faculty and corporate sponsors. Intercollegiate athletics are a useful tool for universities to build connections with important stakeholders such as students, faculty, and corporate sponsors (Gregg, Lee & Wilson, 2016). These three groups were deemed as key stakeholders for several reasons, but most importantly, all three have a vested interest in the university and its success. Students were selected based on the importance of the university brand in prospective students' selection process. University faculty members were selected based on the role the university brand plays in the recruitment process when filling positions. Corporate sponsors were selected due to their unique relationship with a university and its brand. Corporate sponsors are not only a source of revenue for universities, but the university brand is connected to their brand. Therefore, it is important to include their perception of the university brand and how athletics fits into it. For this research, an empirical study was conducted on the campus of a public university in mid-western United States. Participants from each of the three key stakeholder groups were asked to complete a survey that required them to state to which degree they agreed with statements concerning the influence of athletics on the brand of a university. A large portion of the survey focused on two aspects, brand image and brand

identity. According to Clopton and Finch (2017), “Big-time college athletics have been a vital aspect in the process of developing brand image for many well-known universities in the United States” (p. 138).

The results of the study show that intercollegiate athletics have a significant impact on the brand of a university in the opinion of students, faculty and corporate sponsors on the dimensions of increased visibility, perceived academic quality, and development of a distinct university identity. In addition, attending athletic events was viewed as a key component of the “college experience.” It is noteworthy, however, that in terms of the importance of athletics to the overall university brand, corporate sponsors (compared to students and faculty) ranked it higher than perceived social life on campus, and geographical location. Based on these findings, it is clear that athletics does and should have a role in the branding of a university. Implications for university administrators are discussed.

References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: Research findings shed light on the perceptions of key stakeholders (students, faculty and corporate sponsors) on the effect of athletics on the University brand. This study can be useful to University administrators in the formulation of branding and communication strategies directed at various stakeholders.

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