UNIVERSITY BRANDING: THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

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ABSTRACT

A recent ESPN campaign included a mock Duke University advertisement that conveyed the significant contribution of intercollegiate athletics to institutional brand equity at even the most prestigious academic institutions. The ad positioned Duke's athletic feats as more relevant and important to prospective students and their parents than the school's academic reputation; yet, with the exception of Alessandri (2007), the literature has not explicitly considered the contributions of intercollegiate athletics in building University brands. To date, authors that have studied brand equity in intercollegiate athletics have almost universally considered branding as it relates to building team brand equity (Gladden, Milne & Sutton, 1998; Ross, 2006), as opposed to the contribution of athletic brands to institutional brand equity.

Our framework is a conceptualized hierarchical process model that draws on existing theory to put forth three categories of antecedents to build University brand equity: organization-induced, market-induced, and experience-induced. Antecedents are suggested to contribute to University brand equity through two formative dimensions, 1) brand awareness and 2) brand meaning, leading to institutional outcomes and consequences. We adopted the service-based brand equity framework used by Ross (2006) as the foundation for our conceptual model. Like the athletic teams considered in the Ross model, universities are best considered as service organizations. We do however depart from Ross (2006) in two important ways. First, we consider both athletic and non-athletic contributors to university brand equity, and second, we utilize Berry's (2000) brand meaning construct, rather than Ross' (2006) brand associations construct.

Data for this study were collected in two phases. A random sample of 30 NCAA Division I-A university website home pages were content analyzed as to the emphasis and of intercollegiate athletics programs. The analysis confirmed that athletics programs are widely publicized with 83% of the websites examined featuring athletics prominently on the University's home page (not the athletic department home page). More interesting for the scope of the current study, 40% of schools highlighted intercollegiate athletics in the "About Our University" statement, and nearly a third highlighted athletics in the "future students" section. Clearly, universities are actively publicizing their athletic programs and achievements as part of their overall institutional branding efforts.

Next, we extracted data from two publically-available datasets (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and Equity and Athletics dataset) to construct a panel for analysis. The resulting panel dataset contains five years of data for the 124 schools that were NCAA Division IA members throughout the period. We performed an exploratory analysis using regression to examine the effects of institutional investment on total student application numbers, student retention rates, and graduation rates. Independent variables (all calculated per FTE) include: athletic expense, instructional expense, research expense, institutional support expense, student service expense, public service expense, and other core expense. Step-wise regression models were constructed to examine the relative influence of the independent variables on the dependent variables. In each case, instructional expense is the first variable to enter the models. Interestingly, athletic expense is the second variable to enter each of the best fitting models for Total Applications, FT Retention Rate and Graduation Rate. It is potentially very important that athletic expense per FTE has a stronger influence than student services expense, institutional support expense and other areas of institutional investment.

It is clear that institutions are investing in, and seeking positive outcomes from, intercollegiate athletics programs. The current data demonstrates an important role for athletics programs in attracting student applications, as well as retaining and graduating students. While it is not surprising that investment in instructional expense appears to be the most powerful predictor of these student outcomes, it may be surprising to some to see athletic investment consistently perform as the second strongest predictor - ahead of historically prominent areas such as student services investment, research investment, and institutional support investments often more closely associated with the academic core. The analysis here is preliminary and leads to as many questions as it answers. Additional analysis of this dataset, as well as building in measures of athletic performance, and other potential brand equity outcomes (e.g., donation behavior, alumni involvement) will provide a more complete understanding of the role intercollegiate athletics play in building today's University brands.

References Available on Request.