

HOME-COURT ADVANTAGE: A CASE STUDY OF  
NCAA DIVISION I MEN'S BASKETBALL STUDENT SECTIONS

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Doron Tamari: Home-Court Advantage: A Case Study of  
NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Student Sections  
(Under the direction of Nels Popp)**

Across the nation, universities are facing challenges when it comes to attracting students to athletic events, specifically in the revenue-generating sports of football and basketball. Regardless of the on-field and on-court success of the team, student attendance has been declining across the board for the past several years due to numerous reasons. This case study examines three schools who have adapted and enhanced their student section policies in order to increase student attendance and engagement. The schools selected for the case study were: University of Illinois, Iowa State University, and Michigan State University. These student sections were chosen due to their perceived excellence and creative and differentiated approaches to student section policies, ticketing, attendance, and engagement. Several key differentiators, including policy formation, in-arena seating locations, and student leadership structure were identified. In addition, implications and recommendations for managers and marketers are discussed, and areas for future research are presented.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

One of the trademark elements of any college basketball game is the presence of a packed and boisterous student section that creates an atmosphere mirroring a European soccer stadium more than an NBA arena. While the student section is a staple of college basketball, not all student sections are created equal; some have nicknames, designated student leaders, and signature color schemes and cheers separating them from the rest (Weinberger, 2012). The best-known student sections have become so integral to the atmosphere they provide that they take on a personality and life all their own, such as the Duke University Cameron Crazies or Michigan State's IZZONE.

Recently, student attendance at National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) events has decreased at schools across the country; articles have described an alarming trend of student apathy, even at extremely successful programs such as Alabama and Georgia football and Duke and UCLA basketball (Soper, 2013). The Chronicle of Higher Education found that one in five Division I men's basketball programs had seen a regular-season attendance drop of 20% or more between 2009 and 2012 (Attendance swings in major college basketball, 2012). While this includes both students and non-students, it points to the challenges facing schools across the country who are competing for fans who would increasingly rather sit on their couch and watch at home.

## **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to perform a case study on three of the leading NCAA Division I Men's Basketball student sections in order to determine some of the defining characteristics enabling their success. Based on the results of the case study, other schools will have the opportunity to implement some of the elements in hopes of increasing attendance at their individual home athletic events.

## **Research Questions**

Based on a review of related literature and the common issues surrounding this topic, the following research questions were formed to guide this study on athletic departments that have realized success in student attendance:

**RQ1:** What were the primary motivations and strategies behind creating the student section policies for the selected athletic departments?

**RQ2:** What process did the selected athletic departments go through to formulate the student section policies?

**RQ3:** What strategies have the selected athletic departments utilized to successfully market and appeal to the student body in the hopes of increasing attendance?

**RQ4:** What recommendations do the selected athletic departments have for other athletic departments who would like to increase student attendance?

## **Assumptions**

1. The research methods used in this study are valid and reliable.
2. The student sections examined are the official student sections that are run in accordance with university and athletic department guidelines.

## **Delimitations**

1. The selected basketball programs and their respective student sections may have inherent advantages and disadvantages that may make application to other schools difficult.
2. Only three teams were chosen for analysis, which may not accurately represent the total number of teams with successful student sections.
3. Only studying Division I programs may limit the application of this research to Division II and Division III, as well as Junior College and NAIA programs. The results of this study may not be completely applicable to sports other than basketball and the successful techniques found with these teams may not work for other programs.

## **Definitions of Terms**

1. **NCAA:** The National Collegiate Athletic Association, the governing body of athletic competition for the majority of schools in the US.
2. **Revenue Sport:** One of the two major sports that drive revenue production at NCAA institutions: football and men's basketball.
3. **Student Section:** The official seating area inside a basketball venue that is designated for current students of the respective school.

## **Significance of Study**

This study looks to provide insight into the factors that have created successful student sections at specific institutions in the hopes that some of these characteristics can be applied at other institutions in ways that make sense to their own individual needs. Diminished student attendance at athletic events (specifically in revenue sports) is a challenge plaguing schools across the country that has many short and long-term consequences if it continues to go untreated and unchanged. These include a reduced home-court advantage, an increase in surplus tickets

that could be sold or used in other ways, and reduced fan engagement leading to potential lowered engagement and alumni giving. Finding the cause for the exodus of student fans and coupling that information with successful initiatives should assist athletic departments in crafting strategies to improve their outlook. The results of the case study could be used by many Division I programs to improve student attendance at men's basketball and football games, in addition to potentially some Olympic sports.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **The Student Dilemma**

The student attendance situation in intercollegiate athletics is currently a challenge that athletic departments face with lasting long-term implications. Student tickets are generally either free or extremely reduced in price and are located in highly desirable areas of the arena. If students are not attending, there are empty seats that can influence an athletic department in both the short and long-term. There is an opportunity cost associated with the lost revenue from potential ticket sales and it can reflect poorly on the school when highly visible seats are empty. Many universities have faced “difficulty ‘selling’ the allotment of free student tickets for games against weaker opponents and lesser known non-conference foes, which created a lackluster atmosphere and a decrease in revenue potential” (Peetz, 2011, p. 115).

With this in mind, athletic departments have become more focused on addressing the challenge of increasing overall attendance: “Due to this dynamic situation, increasing the attractiveness of sporting events and maximizing revenues has become vital to an athletic department's financial well-being” (Peetz, 2011, p. 115). Long-term, reduced student attendance at athletic events can also lead to diminished affinity for the university and decreased ticket buying and giving when students become alumni, creating a snowball effect that hurts the entire athletic department (Rovell, 2014). Mississippi State athletic director Scott Stricklin sums up the issue by commenting that “[Athletic departments and universities] can't afford to lose a generation” (Cohen, 2013).

So, what are the main factors limiting student attendance at athletics events? According to a study of Southeastern Conference (SEC) student attendance at football games, there are three main causes that are keeping students away: unknown and/or lackluster opponents, reduced cell phone and mobile data reception, and the availability of high-definition television coverage (Cohen, 2013). There are myriad other issues to consider as well, including outdated and confusing student ticketing policies, the academic constraints on students' time, the on-field and on-court performance of the team, and the draw of partying and drinking with friends instead of attending the game. When combined, a very grim picture of student attendance is presented, one that schools of all shapes and sizes are facing across the nation (Rovell, 2014). West Virginia University Director of Athletics Shane Lyons, who came to WVU after three years as Deputy Director of Athletics at Alabama and a decade as an associate commissioner at the Atlantic Coast Conference, recently summed up the issue:

There are so many more opportunities for entertainment for the younger generations. There's different things they consume their time with than the limited amount 10 or 15 years ago. Across the board, what I have seen is that there is still interest from our students, but it's a different aspect. You look at our student involvement. They show up late, they leave early. They are multitasking a lot along the way.

It's something we are all looking at because we are all wondering if they are not participating, will their interest be all that great? The answer is it's hard to project.

How do we keep that interest level at its peak as opposed to numbers continuing to drop? How do we keep them there longer? How do we get them there earlier? They are still showing up, but it's eight minutes into the first quarter and by the second quarter it's full. Then all the sudden, at the end of the third quarter, it's going in the opposite direction. So they are showing up, and it'll fill up, it just takes longer.

It's not a West Virginia issue. We had the issues at Alabama when I was there. We talk to Athletic Directors around the nation and they have the issue. It's a trend across the country. That's what we talk about.

So what options do we have to be more mobile and to capture that audience? We are looking at the I generation now. What's that going to be over the next 10-20 years? I think everybody is trying to get their arms around it (Keller, 2017).

## **The SEC Struggles**

Over the past several years, many leading media outlets have examined the growing trend of student apathy, including ESPN, the *Sports Business Journal*, *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and dozens of local channels. According to their findings, programs that have enjoyed great athletic success and previous boundless support are struggling to fill their student sections. For example, the University Georgia has had a thirty-nine percent no-show rate in its 18,000-seat football student section even though the team has consistently been ranked in the top ten for several seasons. In fact, no game since 2009 has attracted even 15,000 students, leading to thousands of empty seats and growing concern. Georgia has started to sell a block of 2,000 seats to young alumni at reduced rates in the hopes of filling the unused allotment and generating additional revenue (Cohen, 2013).

Southeastern Conference rival University of Alabama also had a thirty-two percent no-show rate between 2009 and 2012 even though Coach Nick Saban led the Crimson Tide to three national championships in four years. The situation reached its nadir in the 2013 season when Saban personally called out the students and had the Student Government Association suspend their protected block seating for the University of Tennessee game, citing the student handbook in the process (Brown, 2013). "Excessive tardiness or early departure from the stadium" are both listed as unacceptable behavior in the handbook, allowing the SGA to open those seats up to all students. SGA President Jimmy Taylor summed up the decision by explaining that the "SGA will continue to encourage sustained student attendance at football games. We are currently and will always research other programs and initiatives to support this goal and any other goals that work to enhance the student experience at The University of Alabama." (Brown, 2013)

Other schools have looked at different options in hopes of attracting students. At the University of Michigan, student football ticket prices were raised by twenty-three percent and seats were allocated on a first-come basis instead of assigned seating in order to attach a higher value to each ticket and force students to arrive early for better seats. The student no-show rate stood at twenty-five percent while almost fifty percent of students arrived late to games, especially the frequent noon kickoffs that are a staple of Big Ten schedules (Steinbach, 2013). Michigan State University has spent two million dollars to upgrade the Wi-Fi system at Spartan Stadium in order to allow students to stay connected to social media and alleviate the logjam that usually occurs on game day. The University of Maryland instituted a new student ticketing policy that can be accessed digitally through email and smartphones. Both Maryland and the University of Minnesota have created student-specific tailgate areas to provide a meeting area for students, with live music and food options (Steinbach, 2013). However, this issue is not solely impacting football; even the most successful basketball programs have been struggling to fill their famous student sections.

### **The Struggle of the Blue Bloods**

According to *The Chronicle*, Duke's student newspaper, attendance in the famed Cameron Crazies student section has been dwindling over the past five seasons. In 2009-10, average attendance in the 1,200-seat student section peaked at 750 students (Cusack, 2012). The following year that dropped to 700 and then 650 in 2011-12, leading to an average of 300 general admission tickets to be sold in Section 17 to Iron Dukes members at \$65 each. While this leads to increased revenue of almost twenty thousand dollars per game, "it has nothing to do with the revenue. We just want it to be full," Director of Marketing and Relations Mike Forman said. "If there were 1,200 students every game we would love it" (Cusack, 2012).



During the 2011-12 season, only two Duke home games required the full allotment of student seats, and both were matchups against top-ranked contenders Michigan State and archrival University of North Carolina. Students cited the lack of exciting teams coming to Cameron Indoor (Duke had only played three ranked non-conference opponents in the previous four years) and the difficulty of camping out in K-ville, the student line to gain access to games. “It does take a lot to go to K-Ville and wait outside, sometimes in the cold and in the rain, and then go into Cameron where you have to stand and jump up and down,” co-head line monitor Ellie Garrett said. “Students need to realize that going to Cameron is...an awesome experience” (Cusack, 2012). While this is true for a passionate group of students, it seems that the rest of the student body is having some trouble agreeing.

Diminishing student attendance is a national trend, Forman said, and collegiate sports marketing departments have been combating it in a variety of ways. Many have altered their in-game experiences to become more engaging during stoppages in play, especially timeouts and halftime. Over the last few years, Duke has begun incorporating highlight videos, player introductions and popular music into its pregame festivities, but the marketing department currently has no plans to significantly alter the in-game atmosphere. ‘Every other school in the country is playing canned music during timeouts, doing cheesy promotions,’ Forman said. ‘We try to stay away from that’ (Cusack, 2012).

While Duke does not seem inclined to greatly alter their current system, it is obvious that on-court success is no longer enough to guarantee student attendance at every game.

The University of Kansas, long known for having one of the nation’s greatest arenas and student sections, recently announced that 420 prime seats, “adjacent to KU’s bench in the middle and upper sections, will be reallocated to boosters as part of an arrangement that will lower students’ season ticket combo packs from \$179 to \$159” (Newell, 2017). According to associate AD Jim Marchiony, the main impetus for this change was a decline in student attendance. Since 2007, Kansas’ record at Allen Fieldhouse is an astonishing 140-3, equating to one of the greatest statistical home-court advantage in college athletics in that time. In addition, the Jayhawks won

eleven consecutive Big 12 titles, made the NCAA Tournament each season, and advanced to the Sweet 16 eight times, Elite 8 six times, Final Four twice, and won the 2008 national championship, all in that span. Yet, the 4,000 student tickets available at each home game were not being used, even by students who had paid to purchase them at the beginning of the season.

The athletic department has to juggle many factors when deciding to make a change like this, and enlisted the help of the Student Senate in order to smooth the process. Mady Womack, KU's student body president, surmised:

I think students read, 'Oh, we're losing student seats again.' Students obviously always will be upset, but the reality is, our student attendance numbers ... this will still leave us with plenty of seats to be above even the peak student attendance in the last 10 years. So I'm not concerned about any students not getting a seat (Newell, 2017).

Another motivation for the athletic department is the financial windfall that will result from the switch. According to the article, KU Athletics has already started selling the Section 19 seats. To be eligible, a booster must be at the All-American level, which requires a minimum \$10,000 donation each year. Additionally, season tickets are \$1,650 in rows 1-11 and \$1,275 in rows 12 and above. Opening up these seats to donors as opposed to students could increase revenue from donations and ticket sales to the tune of \$500,000 annually. This is the second time in three years that student section tickets were redistributed to high-paying donors, as a similar situation unfolded in 2014. All told, 540 seats, approximately 13.5% of the student section allotment, have been categorized as donor seating. If the University of Kansas is unable to fill their vaunted student section with all of the on-court success they have enjoyed, how can other schools hope to do the same? Luckily, there are studies that have shown some of the factors that drive student attendance and have positively impacted other institutions struggling with this issue.

## **Who Attends Basketball Games?**

In a pioneering study on student attendance, Schurr, Ruble and Ellen (1985) compared undergraduate students who either did or did not attend a college basketball game. The results were broken down based on demographic characteristics in addition to results from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), leading to a snapshot of the general student fan. The results showed that physical education and business majors had high proportions of attending as opposed to not attending, which the researchers expected. Computer science-math and radio-TV majors also had high levels of attendance. Education, physical and biological science, arts and humanities, architecture, and nursing all had at least 59% non-attendance for their respective students (Schurr, Ruble & Ellen, 1985).

Not surprisingly, males were more likely to attend the game, as 61% of male students went to games as opposed to only 40% of females (Shurr, Rubble & Ellen, 1985). Race was also a factor; 69% of African American students studied attended a game while only 49% of white students were found to do the same. Other interesting results included that student attendance increased as the student's living situation (dorm, walking distance, driving distance) in relation to the arena decreased (the closer they lived, the more likely they were to go), the student's age decreased (more freshmen went as compared to seniors), and the distance to their hometown increased (the closer they grew up to campus, the less likely they were to attend). From this data, a general profile of those attending and not attending games could be drawn: males living in dorms in one of the main majors were 78% likely to attend, while females living far from the arena in one of the science majors were only 12% likely to attend (Schurr, Ruble & Ellen, 1985). Schools could use this information to craft their messaging to students and try to attract different demographics to athletic events.

In a follow-up study, Schurr, Wittig, and Ruble (1988) examined the “demographic and personality characteristics associated with persistent, occasional, and non-attendance” at men’s basketball games by college students. The study looked at sophomore students and their attendance habits at a game from their freshman to sophomore years. Their research showed that male students were very likely to be persistent attendees, and students living in on-campus dorms were also more likely to attend several games. In addition, both studies found that the further a student’s hometown was from campus, the more likely they were to attend and attend persistently. This led the researchers to believe that there is a strong link between out-of-area students and their desire to connect to their new surroundings and ‘hometown team’ (Schurr, Wittig, & Ruble, 1988). While this makes sense overall, it is surprising that many students who grew up in the vicinity of the university did not have as strong a connection to the athletic teams as might be expected; this inference may be very useful when discussing the challenges large state schools, composed of mostly in-state students, face when it comes to attracting student attendance. Finally, the study also looked into the presence of the nation’s leading scorer at the second game to see if the attraction of a ‘star player’ contributed to any of the attendant’s motivations. Their research showed that there was *not* a strong correlation between the star player’s presence and increased persistent attendance, especially in the female group that was least likely to attend games; the impact on said group was minimal and not significant (Schurr et al., 1988).

### **Impact on Student Life**

While the previous studies looked at demographic and personality information of the students, a series of studies examined the positive impact attending athletic events had on college students. A study conducted by Wann and Robinson indicated that there are “identifiable and

measureable benefits (academic and psychological)” for college students who become involved with their school's sport teams as a fan (Wann & Robinson, 2002, p. 37). Another study concluded that attending sporting events “would lead to social integration benefits for the student attendees and, consequently, result in peer networks, which could lead to concrete advantages in terms of grade point average and graduation rates” (Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, and Henriksen, 1993).

The results of Wann’s latest research confirmed the hypothesis that students who regularly attended athletic events posted higher academic achievement. Those students who regularly attended events maintained a significantly higher average GPA (2.55) and graduation rate (64%) as compared to those in the non-attending group (2.36 GPA and 48% graduation rate). Most importantly, the groups did not differentiate greatly in high school GPA or college entrance exam scores, meaning their expected success in college was equal, but those students who did attend athletic events “appear to have received benefits via their interest in and involvement with their school's sport program as fans (although definitive conclusions about causation are not warranted due to the non-experimental nature of the study)” (Wann, et.al, 2008, p. 243).

The previous studies have concluded that increased student participation through athletics has a very positive impact on student life and satisfaction. Most importantly, “levels of team identification (for football, basketball, and the university sport program as a whole) were significantly and positively correlated with levels of involvement with the university, persistence toward graduation, satisfaction with the university, enjoyment of the university, and perceptions that the university had met expectations” (Wann, 2008). Overall, literature suggests that “students may be able to gain tangible benefits (e.g., produce higher grade point averages) via an

identification with their university's sports teams and that universities may benefit as well (e.g., gain higher levels of persistence and involvement among students) (Wann, et al, 243, 2008).

### **Building a Student Rewards Program**

Some schools have decided to face the student attendance challenge head on by creating incentive programs that drive attendance by providing sponsored promotional giveaways, food discounts or giveaways, and special experiences for diehard fans. This idea was born out of the well-known concept that many businesses use to reward their most frequent users, such as airline frequent-flier programs or supermarket shopper cards (Kim, Shi, & Srinivasan, 2001). Kansas State University decided to implement a rewards program focused on entry to the annual Kansas game, which was extremely important to the student body, in order to generate greater overall attendance at the other games on the home schedule. Entrance to the Kansas game was directly tied to the amount of previous games attended by each student, leading to an 18.2% increase in student tickets used per game and an average of 1,246 more students attending each game. (Peetz, 2011, p. 117). KSU was successfully able to use a rivalry game as their incentive without the need for other promotional items or enticements.

In Peetz's study, he suggests three guidelines for the successful implementation of a student rewards program: 1) "Supplemental marketing strategies" must be produced in concert with the rewards program in order to raise the attractiveness of the event or program; 2) "marketing activities should be aimed at developing stronger connections to the team," which will enhance the relationship between consumer and product down the road; and 3) the social aspects of attending an event should be emphasized, such as encouraging fans to come out in groups or a unifying message such as a white-out (Peetz, 2011, p. 120). When combined, the

strength of the rewards program is amplified and can successfully lead to student attendance at less-heralded games and more engagement throughout the season.

### **Student Attendance Research Initiative Reveals Insights**

With the issue of student attendance impacting schools of all sizes nationwide, the National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators (NACMA) commissioned a survey, in conjunction with the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management Bureau of Sport and Leisure Commerce at the University of Memphis, of almost 12,000 participants from 81 different institutions across the country. The purpose was to examine the motivating factors for student attendance at certain sporting events and determine if any aspects had changed since the previous study in 2015 (Havard, Ryan & McGee, 2016, p. 3).

According to the study, students view college athletic events as social events as much as sporting events, and the record of the team is only the fifth most important factor in their decision-making process on whether to attend or not. Watching the “live game,” experiencing the “spirited stadium atmosphere and traditions,” and socializing with friends were all rated higher than having a winning team, which is good for marketers looking to improve their student attendance as these elements are easier to control and enhance. Receiving free giveaways and promotional items, along with the presence of cool halftime shows or in-game entertainment, did not rank very highly, which could signal a shift in how marketers choose to spend their yearly basketball entertainment budgets (Havard, Ryan & McGee, 2016, p. 12).

When asked what reasons influence their attendance at an event, students once again cited a friend’s invitation as the number one factor, alluding to the importance of social interaction. However, they did list the chance to win free promotional items or get free and/or discounted food at the game as the second and third highest influencer. Although this was not

reflected in their response for why they ultimately attended a game, it could mean that using these elements as “hooks” in marketing materials could be beneficial to attract interest and attendance. The main reasons students gave for not attending were somewhat anticipated: academic obligations, inconvenient game times, a work schedule conflict, and prior family commitments; having a team with a losing record was only the sixth most cited reason (Havard, Ryan & McGee, 2016, p. 13).

The final section dealt with why students choose to leave a game early or stay longer. The most-cited reasons for leaving a game early were losing by a large margin, sickness, and fatigue. Students indicated they were likely to stay at a game that was competitive, and once again were interested in receiving both free promotional items and/or food. Postgame traditions such as singing the alma mater were listed third. Loyalty points and reward systems were not a huge factor for men’s basketball alone, but when combined with other sports, could play a role in increasing the number of students attending and staying longer at secondary sports (Havard, Ryan & McGee, 2016, p. 14).

### **Student Input is Key**

Another element that has played a critical role in the success of some student organizations and cheering sections is the presence of a student leadership body that helps to shape the policies and procedures of the overall group. In a 2008 study, students were asked about their overall satisfaction with the ticketing policy for the men’s basketball program at their university. This study was particularly thought-provoking due to the constraints that student seating presents, including the limited options available to students, limited recovery opportunities available to marketers, and the high likelihood of dissatisfaction among students (Greenwell, Brownlee, Jordan, & Popp, 2008).



The results showed choice greatly impacted customer satisfaction, meaning marketers must take student input into account when crafting policies or risk alienating the core constituency. The study suggested this is due to two factors: the ownership that is potentially created by being involved in the decision-making process and the minimization of unrealistic expectations by those who were involved. This scenario utilized a student leadership structure that made plans in conjunction with the athletic department (Greenwell, Brownlee, Jordan, & Popp, 2008). Conversely, the results also showed that “merely soliciting the opinion of a particular stakeholder group rather than involving them in the decision-making policy may not be enough to impact satisfaction/dissatisfaction in cases with adverse outcomes” (Greenwell, Brownlee, Jordan, & Popp, 2008, p. 76). Students need to feel like their suggestions were heard and then implemented, or it could lead to higher rates of dissatisfaction later.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusions derived from the research include that increased student attendance and involvement is a net positive for both the school and the student; solutions to minimize the growing apathy found on campuses should be vigorously explored by both parties in order to find strategies that will work. Even though student attendance is not necessarily the most important element of an athletic department’s bottom line, as the literature suggests, a trend of this magnitude could lead to further issues down the line, including a diminished game day atmosphere and reduced student affinity and engagement. Finding out how to connect to current students will also hold potential benefits for the school long-term with issues ranging from student retention and alumni donations to ticket sales, so it is in the interest of many departments to find solutions to the existing situation.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHOD**

This research study was conducted using phenomenological qualitative research, including structured personal interviews with leaders at three NCAA Division I institutions that have well-known and successful men's basketball student sections. This purposeful sample was selected in order to focus the research on a select number of institutions with student sections that have differentiated themselves rather than selecting all student sections, some of which may not implement any diverse strategies. A qualitative method was selected because this approach pieces together empirical data and interpretive practices to achieve an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The goal of this research was to develop an evaluation of the seating location, marketing, ticketing, and engagement policies and strategies employed by these leading student sections in order to facilitate successful efforts at other institutions.

#### **Sample Selection**

In order to positively impact as many Division I schools as possible, the decision to closely study three different student sections was made. The selected student sections are of varying size and layout, in addition to representing different levels of competition and team success. Basketball was selected as the sport because student sections are well-defined when compared to football and have more differentiating factors to study. In addition, the smaller size of the basketball student section allows for a greater impact of potential changes that may be implemented.

In this study, the well-known student sections at the University of Illinois, Iowa State University, and Michigan State University were selected for further examination based on their

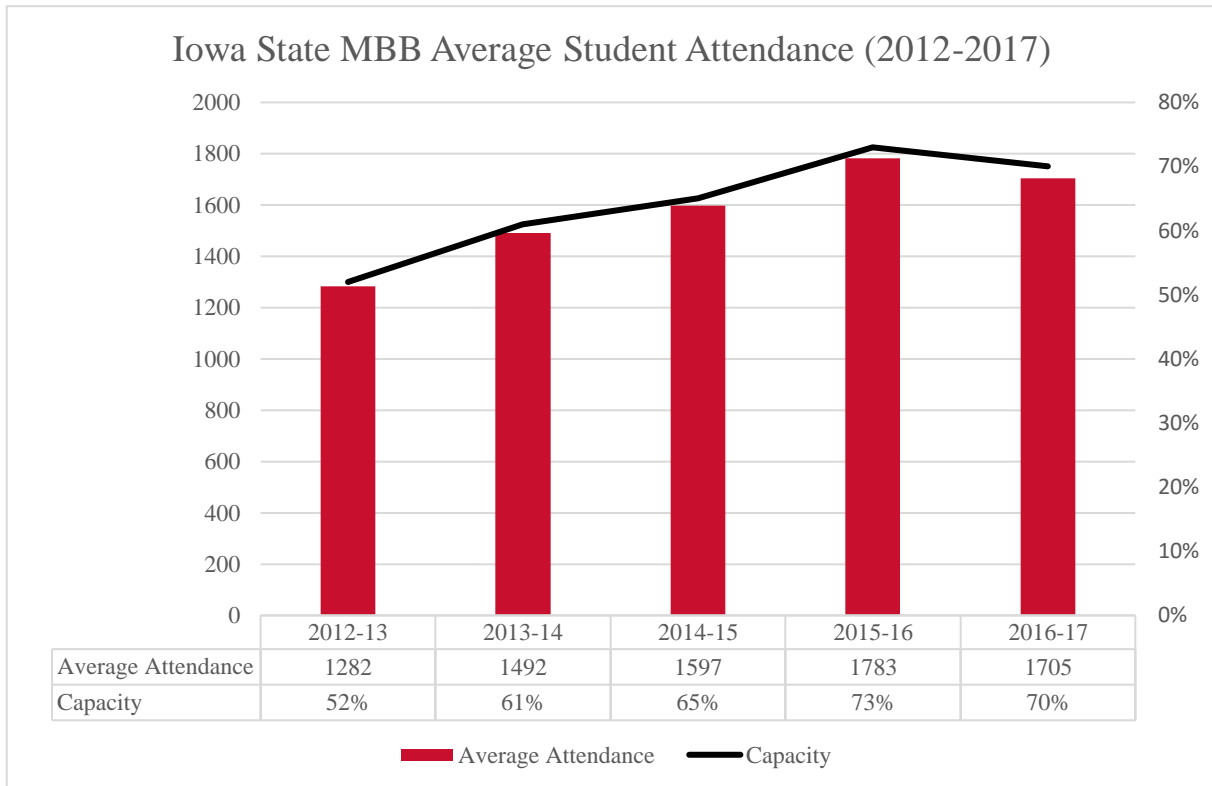
differentiated policies and attendance figures. While no student section is perfect or achieves 100% attendance, these three have created a diverse approach to attracting and keeping students engaged, equating to higher attendance figures, increased notoriety, and a positive impact on the home-court advantage their team enjoys.

Michigan State's IZZONE has become one of the most recognized and feared student sections in the country, regularly ranking among the top sections by opposing players, coaches, fans, and the media (Mitchell & Ryan, 2015; Johnson, 2016). In the past, IZZONE policies required attendance at all games in Year 1 in order to receive lower level seats in Year 2, in addition to continued attendance to keep the seats. Each student's arrival time and overall attendance were tracked, all members had to purchase the 13-game student package (which did not include games over breaks) and also participate in the IZZONE Campout (2013-14 Men's Basketball Student Admission Information, 2013). Over the years, the staff's emphasis on data collection and student feedback has led to modifications to the policy, including game selection and seating criteria, in order to continue filling up the student seats.

Illinois' Orange Krush requires students to fundraise for their seating allocation, generating over \$2.7 million for the foundation of the same name since its inception in 1998; during the 2013-14 season, Orange Krush raised over \$150,000 for the university and 58 charities (Orange Krush Foundation, 2014). Although the Illini have struggled on the court recently, this aspect has continued to succeed and become an emblematic role of the section. In addition, the recent renovations to the State Farm Center included the creation of a special club section specifically for students, believed to be the first of its kind, known as the Orange Krush Club (Illinois Renaissance, 2014). The Krush board explained:

The renovated State Farm Center will provide us with more seats and amenities that will allow us to grow the Orange Krush membership base. This will lead to a stronger Orange

Krush impact in the community, more dollars allocated towards local organizations, and of course, an increasingly exciting experience at Illinois basketball games for team and fans alike. We could not be more excited about this opportunity to grow as an organization by striving towards our mission to support 'Students, Campus, and Community' (2014).



*Figure 1.* Average student attendance at Iowa State men’s basketball games over the past five seasons, including percentage of student section capacity (2,448 seats).

At Iowa State, the Cyclone Alley student section tickets for men’s basketball are combined with football and women’s basketball into one package and oversold in order to increase the percentage of occupied seats in the section for most games. In addition, the Athletic Department teams up with the Alumni Association to manage Cyclone Alley with a committee made up of 12 student members responsible for enhancing the game-day environment (Cyclone Alley: Learn More, 2016). These efforts have led to a 10% increase in purchased student ticket packages, resulting in \$82,500 in additional yearly revenue, while also increasing the average

ticket scan rate during men's basketball games from 52% during the 2012-13 season to 70% in 2016-17, as can be seen in Figure 1 above (N. Terry, personal communication, July 6, 2017).

### **Procedures & Data Collection**

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Human Subjects Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After receiving approval for the study, athletic department personnel at the three schools in various departments (sport administration, marketing, student leadership) were contacted, first via an introductory email that included instructions and procedures, and followed by a phone interview with scripted questions. A structured interview prompt consisting of ten items was created in order to attain uniformity among the individual institutions. In addition, background information about each school, basketball arena, and team history was collected in order to have a better understanding of the situation that drove their decision-making and processes. This also allowed the interview to be focused on the student section as opposed to surplus information.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF STUDY**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to examine and provide solutions to the issue of waning student attendance at athletic events by researching three athletic departments that have implemented successful men's basketball student section policies to see what, if anything, could be utilized by other departments around the country. Declining student attendance is an issue that impacts institutions universally and can have far-reaching consequences. The research questions assessed the primary motivations and strategies behind the current student section policies, the processes that the department utilized to form the current policies, the strategies applied to successfully market to the student body, and finally, any recommendations for other departments who are interested in increasing their student attendance.

This thesis used in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the men's basketball student sections at three Division I athletic departments, specifically their basketball student sections. Three athletic department members from each school were interviewed, for a total of nine interviews, ranging from 25 to 50 minutes in length. These individuals are listed in Table 1. The interviews included ten open-ended questions that were then transcribed for coding and to uncover themes emerging from the data. These were then investigated to find any connections to previous research, examine the policies that contribute to their success, and to provide recommendations to others in the industry.

Table 1

*Athletic Department & Student Section Interviewees*

NAME	TITLE	INSTITUTION
Brad Wurthman	Associate AD, Marketing & Fan Development	University of Illinois
Sabrina Thiel	Director of Marketing & Fan Development	
Chris Tuttle	Associate Director of Development/Varsity I	
Nathan Terry	Associate Director for Marketing	Iowa State University
Meagan Arce	Assistant Director for Marketing	
Blake Heitman	Cyclone Alley Co-Chair	
Kevin Pauga	Assistant AD, Administration	Michigan State University
Jim Donatelli	Director of Digital Marketing & Fan Engagement	
Ben Limb	Director of IZZONE	

### **Primary Motivations & Strategies**

Although they represent three different universities, many of the issues and resulting goals in each of the interviews followed a similar pattern. Today's students have more access to games, without having to physically be in the arena, than ever before. Combining the relative ease with which they can view games without traveling to the arena, paying for tickets, or committing extra time, students need to be persuaded to attend most events. Six of the nine respondents cited competition from watching at home, bars, and other viewing locations, five mentioned weak and/or unexciting opponents, three noted academic time demands of students, and only two specified weather as common reasons they have heard impact attendance.

According to Michigan State's Jim Donatelli:

The research we've done with some of the on-campus groups that we've talked to, the biggest factor for basketball is the number of games and the quality of the opponent. They are less likely to come to all 18 home games, they are more likely to just come to the teams that they know about and the games that are more important (personal communication, July 5, 2017).

Although only mentioned once, the cost of a student season ticket did not seem to be a major issue for the respondents at these three universities, though other cases, such as the Kansas one previously discussed, have posited that it is an important factor in their student attendance issues.

A common theme is that students are electing to go to fewer games each season even after purchasing the ticket package. For example, this past season, 339 Iowa State students (9% of total ticketholders) purchased the \$249 All-Sports Pass and did not attend a single men's basketball game; on the other end of the spectrum, 571 students (15% of total ticketholders) attended 10 or more games. This no-show rate is one of the biggest concerns for marketers because it implies that even students who are very interested in going to games and have spent money on tickets do not make the effort to attend. To try to combat this trend, all three schools have recently updated their student ticketing policies to increase the number of students eligible to purchase tickets and ultimately attend games. Iowa State increased their All-Sport Pass allotment from 3,750 to 4,000 student ticket buyers even though the student section only has room for 2,448 students per game (N. Terry, personal communication, July 6, 2017). Over the past several seasons, the student section has only exceeded capacity twice and the athletic department was able to find space for those students in other sections of the arena. In addition to giving more students access to tickets and generating more revenue for the athletic department, they are hopeful that they will be able to come closer to filling the section for each game, and not just the high-demand ones against arch-rivals Iowa and Kansas, if the student ticket usage rate stays at current levels.





*Figure 2. Hilton Coliseum Seating Chart. The Cyclone Alley student section is labeled in white while the other colors designate donation levels required for purchasing tickets.*

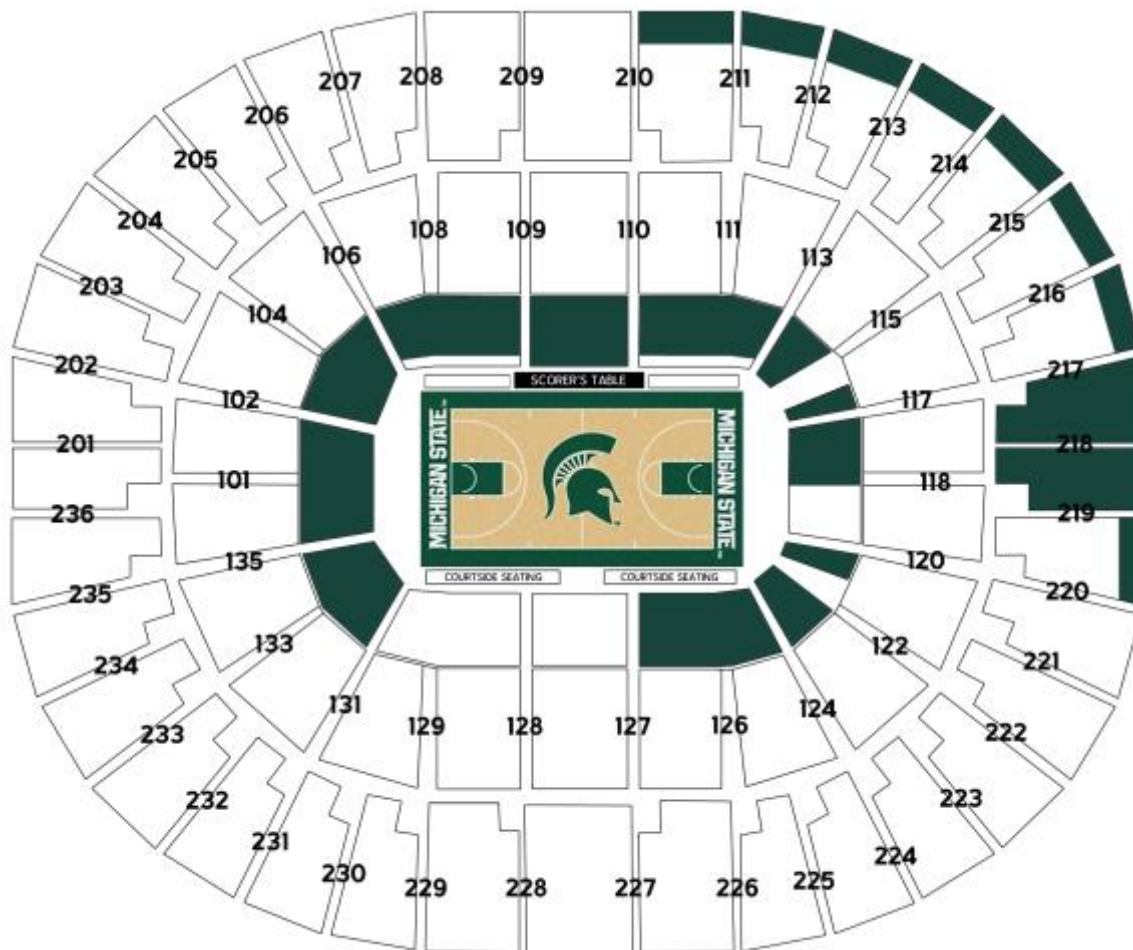
Similarly, both Michigan State and Illinois have made increasing the number of students who are able to attend games a central tenet of their recent policy changes. Illinois, which just wrapped up a massive \$169.5 million renovation of the State Farm Center (formerly Assembly Hall), increased the number of student seats in the most desirable locations around the court, hoping to attract more students to games while enhancing the game day atmosphere for all fans. Students also no longer have to be members of Orange Krush, the official student club of the section, in order to sit in those seats, though members will get priority access.



*Figure 3.* State Farm Center seating chart. The Orange Krush student section is labeled in light orange while the other colors designate donation levels required for purchasing tickets.

At Michigan State, students were previously required to sit in the upper-level seats for a full year before becoming eligible for lower-level seats; while this created intense demand for the lower-level seats, it also alienated many students who felt that sitting in the upper-level was not worth the wait, and others complained that they did not feel like they were part of The IZZONE even though technically all student seats are designated as such. The updated policy allows students to pick and choose which games they would like to attend in smaller blocks, not requiring a full season ticket purchase or attendance at every designated student game. All

students are also permitted to sit in lower-level seats regardless of previous attendance (K. Pauga, personal communication, June 9, 2017).



*Figure 4.* Breslin Center seating chart. The IZZONE student section is labeled in green.

The importance of having a full student section was extremely evident across all of the responses. Every single respondent mentioned the critical role that students play in creating a home-court advantage, specifically citing their ability to generate noise from their sections while simultaneously riling up the rest of the crowd. Seven interviewees mentioned recruiting as another primary benefit, whether it was enticing future student-athletes to attend and play basketball at the institution or in attracting high school students to apply and enroll for their undergraduate studies. These respondents tended to discuss the branding impact of the student

section; the visual of a full sea of students draped in one color, raucously cheering on their school's team, is an image that resonates with people of all ages. Chris Tuttle of Illinois, who was an Orange Krush member as a student, summed up his view of the important role it plays:

You're obviously trying to create a game day environment that will make it an intimidating home court experience for the opposing team, energize your team and the rest of the fan base; I see the student section as being the leaders in that game day environment so the team and the rest of the crowd can feed off of that student section. So when that's full... it helps to create the opportunity for that environment to be as good as it can possibly be...It also helps recruiting, it also helps PR, the perception of your program. Since so many of the games are on TV now, perception is a big thing for recruiting, or fans, or just the general public and what they feel about the school (personal communication, June 7, 2017).

All three respondents from Illinois mentioned the aspect of community involvement and engagement, which ties in strongly to the way their section is run and functions through the Orange Krush Foundation, and as previously noted, has remained consistently strong even during years where the team was not winning as much and student attendance fluctuated. Some other motivations that were mentioned included the importance of selling out the whole arena in general and how student tickets, when left unused, are an eyesore and cause complaints from the general public. Iowa State's Nathan Terry weighed in on this issue as well:

If the facility is not full, people start complaining that students don't care and it becomes a very negative, very toxic environment, so what's made our policy work really well, is we oversold to provide more access for more people. So when someone only attends six games, someone else will also attend six games, it has the appearance of being full (personal communication, July 6, 2017).

Annual goals for the student sections also help provide context into motivations and strategies for filling the student sections. All nine respondents stated that they intended to sell out of their ticket allotment or sell as many 'memberships' as possible in order to fill up the section as much as possible each game. Illinois' Sabrina Thiel introduced a catchy tagline that she uses, "Sell it out, fill it up!" to sum up her annual goals and motivate her marketing and student team

(S. Thiel, personal communication, June 19, 2017). All nine also either mentioned increased engagement or enhanced student experience as another goal, focusing not just on actual attendance, but on having students who were educated on the team and traditions, engaged during the game, and acting as ambassadors for the program to other students on campus.

Michigan State's Ben Limb, a former Director of the IZZONE, stated that:

[their] priorities shifted each game into making sure that everyone who came to the game or bought tickets... [regardless of their class or where they were sitting], [they] really had to emphasize teaching them what to do every game and putting it in the handout that [they] gave every seat, where it said what to do for free throws and what to do for shot clock [and other traditions] (B. Limb, personal communication, July 5, 2017).

While they have different methods to establish this engagement, all of the schools utilize a student leadership structure to get the pulse of the student body and gauge the impact of any policy changes. Two of the respondents mentioned the student leadership specifically in their annual goals, discussing the role that they play in enhancing the game day environment and the student rewards system that they oversee. Iowa State's Meagan Arce spoke about their shared goals:

In general, not just my goals, but the committee's goals, are to fill the student section and get students there, for both men's basketball and women's basketball. I would say that Cyclone Alley, their goals are probably more focused on utilizing their reward system and social media platforms to get people to the arena. And while that is a large goal of ours, another focus area that's going to be put more in the forefront this upcoming year, is not just getting people there, but also keeping them engaged (personal communication, July 6, 2017).

Finally, one individual, Jim Donatelli from Michigan State, stated that a goal of his is to win every home game each season, but no one else disclosed that they also hope to impact the winning fortunes of their team from the stands.

## Policy Formulation

The second research question examined the process used in order to formulate and enhance the student-specific policies at each institution. As mentioned above, all three schools utilize a student leadership group which plays a critical role as a sounding board for the athletic department when considering policy changes and providing feedback on topics ranging from pricing to camping out to sportsmanship. All of the respondents mentioned listening to students' feedback as one element that has made their policy successful. At Illinois, Orange Krush and the marketing department communicate constantly in order to work in tandem.

We adapted throughout the whole year. We would see new things and make that change. I was texting and emailing non-stop with the Orange Krush president from September all the way through March, so we did a lot of communicating and talking it out... So we have very real conversations with them and we'll continue to do that in the future. We'll have a plan but it'll be very flexible and have the communication lines open (S. Thiel, personal communication, June 19, 2017).

Blake Heitman, a leader of the Cyclone Alley Committee at Iowa State, spoke about his own experience from the students' perspective:

One thing that's really helped us is we have an established relationship with the athletic department, which has really helped us to implement some of our ideas by working with them, so I definitely think that having a good relationship with your athletics department, since their goals are similar to yours in terms of what they want the student section to look like, is key (personal communication, July 7, 2017).

Michigan State's Kevin Pauga discussed the benefit of having student leadership in addition to the challenge student turnover poses:

I think that we've listened to the students, we've tried to be very aware of what they have liked and not liked... We're bringing in fresh blood with the students as well. Over any four-year period, the entire section of several thousand students turns completely over so it's constantly evolving and a constantly changing group (personal communication, June 9, 2017).

In addition, all of the responses stated that removing, or at least minimizing, barriers that discourage or alienate students, such as restricted seating zones or ticket allotment limits, is



imperative as today's students do not respond well to them and will not buy tickets or attend games if they feel the process is too onerous or confusing. Brad Wurthman at Illinois discussed their emphasis on ease of access:

I think one thing that has made our policy more successful is we've made it really easy, quite frankly, for students to, at the very least, have access to tickets. We've made some of it difficult and we're working through the process to change that as far as back-end and how are they involved in fundraising, and that's a very unique case to Illinois. They now have the ability to get access to tickets that are delivered to their phones and scanned like a boarding pass. In order to have a student section that is accessible, you have to be able to make changes and make choices to make it easy for them (personal communication, June 21, 2017).

<b>Orange Krush Membership Benefits</b>	<b>Orange Level</b>	<b>Blue Level</b>	<b>Entry Level</b>
Cost of Orange Krush Membership	<b>\$500+</b>	<b>\$250-\$499</b>	<b>\$125-\$249</b>
Order of Entry to State Farm Center on Game Day	<b>1</b> (75 Min. Pregame)	<b>2</b> (70 Min. Pregame)	<b>3</b> (65 Min. Pregame)
Tickets to 14 Games at State Farm Center (All home games while classes are in session)	X	X	X
Mobile Ticket Delivery to Cell Phone	X	X	X
Orange Krush Member T-Shirt	X	X	X
Opportunity to Buy Break Game & Neutral Site Tickets	X	X	X
Pregame Access to 1st Floor of Memorial Stadium	X	X	X
Pregame Food & Drink	X (All Games)	X (Select Games)	
Access to Exclusive Orange Krush Preseason Practice Event	X	X	
Opportunity to Qualify for Orange Krush Roadtrip	X	X	
Access to Orange Krush Club in the State Farm Center	X		
Exclusive Prize Drawings (Autographs, Insider Access, Experiences, Etc.)	X		

Figure 5. Table of Orange Krush member benefits for the 2016-17 season.

Data collection was also discussed by six respondents as an integral part of their decision-making process. Knowing how many students claim tickets and actually attend each game, when

they arrive at the arena, and how they engage with communications tools is extremely beneficial to crafting a well thought out policy that leads to higher attendance. MSU's Pauga described their ongoing efforts to capture data and listen to students:

Our priority is to create an environment that the students are a major part of but also have the knowledge base of how many students we can expect on a given night. That way we know how many tickets we have that we can sell off to the general public. There's a lot of working thoughts there but we're measuring our numbers based on how many members we have, how many people are selecting each game, how many people are attending each game after they've selected, so what is our no-show rate? We're very mindful of those numbers and we get a report the morning after each home game along the way so that we're tracking that data very specifically to try and find those trend lines and see if there's something that we should be doing differently. Truthfully, all that feedback, not only in a numerical sense, but also the feedback from the students prior to the change in policy, is really what drove the change of policy (personal communication, June 9, 2017).

When looking at this data, the respondents saw trends in the overall decline in attendance and attempted to respond appropriately. They increased access to tickets to more students, reduced ticket purchasing hurdles, made it easier to transfer tickets, and allowed students to sit in prime seating locations without having to wait their turn, which had been the case in the past. In general, student input and data utilization were the biggest drivers in formulating and reshaping the student section policies at all three institutions

### **Marketing & Fan Experience**

Once the policy has been updated and established, the next research question examined ways to improve the marketing and fan experience in order to boost attendance at games. All of the respondents mentioned engaging with students as their prime motivator when it came to some of the fan experience decisions made in-venue because of the important role they play in creating an exciting and intimidating atmosphere. Seven respondents brought up music selection and video production as an important element that drives continued student attendance and engagement while five specifically stated that the rest of the crowd feeds off of the student



section's energy. Iowa State's Nathan Terry assessed the role the students play in his game day planning process:

Music is number one. We try to stay with current popular music that the students enjoy to get rowdy to. I think that's one element in general. The other ones that are a little bit more fun when you do any sort of on-court promotion, they tend to be more willing to put themselves in silly positions than adults. They're just they're the ones that make the noise no matter what we do...they're the ones that respond the quickest and the easiest (personal communication, July 6, 2017).

Two of the schools have an in-house DJ while the third has brought one in for bigger games in the past and plans on doing so again in the future. All of the schools also utilize student-specific giveaways and promotional items, sometimes sponsored, to draw students in, such as rally towels, light up objects, chances to win larger prizes, and t-shirts. Additionally, their student rewards programs have played critical roles in helping to drive attendance at what would otherwise be less appealing games while also creating a sense of connection to the team and to other student fans. By utilizing similar promotional items (t-shirts for specific sections, etc.) and augmenting them with exclusive prizes (team official backpacks, limited edition items) they have created incentives on a game-by-game and season-long basis.

At Illinois, entry into the arena is based on donation levels, creating incentive to be a more active Orange Krush member. The Illini staff has also made a point of showing students who are seated close to the court and are the most dressed up and enthusiastic on fan cams during timeouts – “give them the face time that they want...when we do put the crowd on camera, we always err on the side of students because they inevitably will have that reaction that we’re looking for” (B. Wurthman, personal communication, June 21, 2017). They even selected ten students at a game this past season and gave them all chances to win \$10,000 by hitting a half-court shot, with two achieving the feat.

Three respondents discussed that the coach's personality must dictate how they are utilized in marketing efforts while another three mentioned that the situation at each school is different due to frequent coaching changes. For example, both Illinois and Iowa State feature student-athletes prominently in their marketing pieces to students and have the head coach as a secondary piece due to their coach's relatively short tenures, so it's important to take that into account when deciding how best to promote student attendance at basketball games on each campus.

## **Recommendations**

The final research question dealt with recommendations for those interested in revamping and improving their own student sections. When asked for their recommendations and suggestions, respondents discussed everything from seeing what others in the industry are doing to making everything as simple as possible for students. The predominant answers were: to have a thorough understanding of the current situation at your institution (5 out the 9 respondents), take student input seriously and constantly (4/9), and to have a strong relationship from top to bottom in the athletic department (3/9). Responses from all three institutions mentioned the importance of having buy-in from their athletic director, coach, and support staff in creating and implementing policy. Finally, three respondents advocated taking advantage of unique characteristics wherever possible. A good example of this last point is the IZZONE, which is quite a unique situation. At Michigan State, Head Coach Tom Izzo is an alumnus of the university, a national champion, and a member of the Hall of Fame. Izzo was also the catalyst to the creation of a unified student section, which today bears his name as The IZZONE, and he remains extremely involved in the promotion of it. As MSU's Pauga explains:

We've got a head coach that understands the marketing side of things, and not just because it bears his name. He was instrumental, as a young head coach with then

Associate AD for Marketing Mark Hollis (who is the current AD at Michigan State), on really building the IZZONE from day one. And with participation from the initial stage comes incredible ownership, so there's complete buy-in from our head coach. He wants the students to be involved because it's important and he believes that it contributes to a few home wins a year and it's a priority (personal communication, June 9, 2017).

At Michigan State, Izzo takes part in an annual campout for all members of the IZZONE that includes members of the team, entertainment, and games. Conversely, Illinois and Iowa State have newer head coaches with no existing ties to the university, so the way they make use of their coaches in marketing efforts is quite different than Michigan State. These answers reflected many of the previous discussions as well and highlight why these schools have succeeded in establishing strong student section attendance even during rough patches in their win/loss records.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

These three institutions were specifically selected due to their distinct approaches to their student section at basketball games and their ability to keep student attendance relatively high at a time when many schools across the country are struggling to do the same. Trends and demands among student ticket holders are constantly shifting, creating a challenge for athletic departments. Iowa State has steadily increased average attendance at men's basketball games, by 44% over the past 5 seasons, even with the loss of beloved head coach and alumnus Fred Hoiberg. Illinois, coming off four-straight years of missing the NCAA Tournament, still managed to raise \$60,000 last year for local charities as part of the Orange Krush program ("Deadline to Join Orange Krush Approaching," 2016). Michigan State has constantly tinkered with their policies and ticket packages to ensure the IZZONE remains full and at the top of annual rankings, while their education procedures have emphasized engagement and team knowledge (B. Limb, personal communication, July 5, 2017). While they have achieved different levels of success on the court over the years, they have created the structure necessary to weather some of the down seasons and then take advantage of the good ones. Based on the literature review and the responses to the interview questions, there are several key takeaways for athletic department officials to consider as they attempt to enhance and improve their student attendance.

### **Increase Access & Participation**

The reality is that students, for many reasons, are less willing to devote their time and resources to attending games than they have in the past, so schools have to lower barriers to

entry, from pricing to game and seat selection, in order to continue attracting them. This is a difficult balance to strike as there still needs to be a perceived value to student seats and tickets, but departments cannot afford to turn away students. Financially, there is a cost associated with all seating in the arena, and student seats are typically in high-demand areas close to the court. As was the case at Kansas, when the section does not fill up, the athletic department will end up having to make a decision that can have long-term implications on the atmosphere inside the venue and the students' view of attending games. It is difficult to please both students who have a minor interest in attending, but require much effort from the marketing department, and still find ways to incentivize the die-hards who camp out and do not miss a game.

Overselling and lifting restrictions has worked well for these departments, but they have also found ways to reward their most loyal fans in other ways. As Illinois' Brad Wurthman posited, "as we plot out how the students will have an impact, it's very much 'how do we positively reward them for attending'" (personal communication, June 21, 2017). Other departments could follow a similar model fairly easily and the benefits for their department should be far-reaching, potentially increasing revenues, augmenting student attendance, and enhancing the in-game environment.

While the selected student sections were chosen for their perceived attendance successes, the truth is that almost all athletic programs are having trouble retaining student attention and attendance, across divisions and sports. Overselling student tickets and acquiescing to less stringent rules and procedures could be an example of a struggling section, but in these cases, is the result of a response to trends supported by data and student feedback. As an example, Iowa State has been able to raise revenues while slowly providing tickets to more students, which has kept their men's basketball attendance and usage rate relatively high and also boosted their

football attendance. Schools should look at historical data and find a break-even point where tickets sold and the no-show rate are taken into account to try to maximize the student section's capacity. In addition, rewarding die-hard fans with special access to some seating and exclusive rewards, without impacting the access of common student fans, as shown by Michigan State and Illinois in their recent policy updates, could be beneficial. Over time, student attendance should remain high among the most loyal fans while increasing for passive fans, and the hope is that many of the passive fans would be converted into loyal ones through their positive experiences at games and wanting to receive some of the benefits that they see the loyal fans obtaining.

### **Creating a Social Event During an Athletic Event**

Another reoccurring theme that came up in multiple conversations revolved around the social aspect that athletic events play in campus life for many students today and more importantly, how athletic departments can take advantage and harness this. There are several examples of universities around the country trying to do something akin to a student party zone, but nothing as comprehensive and collectively agreed upon as what Illinois has established. In partnership with the Orange Krush Foundation, the athletic department created a special club section inside the State Farm Center especially for students to use during games and events at the arena; the two sides signed a 10-year, \$1 million pact for the naming rights to the Orange Krush Club. Now, the challenge for the fan engagement team is how best to take advantage of this singular opportunity, something they are still figuring out. Currently, the club is open pregame for students to mingle in but there are plans to create more of an exclusive and festive atmosphere in the space that will draw students with offers of free food and drinks and other promotions.

Consistent with Peetz's study on the topic of student attendance, this space utilizes supplemental marketing strategies, develops a stronger connection to the team, and greatly emphasizes the social aspect of attending a game (Peetz, 2011, p. 120). While Illinois had an established student group that was a willing and able partner in this endeavor, it is something that can be replicated at other schools. Converting an under-utilized space in or near the arena, such as a utility room or an open suite, should help to attract students to the new "premium area" while reducing the cost burden for the institution. As the 2016 NACMA student survey indicated, students are influenced by their friends and are most interested in attending along with others. It is imperative to make the athletic event a social one, since many times it is in direct competition with other attractions pulling students away, including Greek life, bars and restaurants, and even just watching with friends at their residence. Marketing and communication pieces to students, whether social media or on campus, should convey both the social and exclusivity aspects while offering related items, such as free food or special experiences available only to students, in order to increase interest. In addition, schools should look for ways to bring groups to the venue together and make it as easy as possible for them to sit together once inside. This could especially help with fraternities, sororities, and student groups, who are many times some of the hardest groups to reach but could provide a great base of fan support in the venue.

The ultimate goal is to create an atmosphere inside the venue that is simply unattainable while watching at home or at a bar, which should be taken into account by athletic departments when planning their pre, in, and post-game programming. For example, Iowa State captured the attention of the nation this year with their light up sticks, given away to everyone in the audience in a nationally-televised game against Kansas. This was the first major opportunity for Iowa

State to show off its brand-new lighting system, which allowed the lights to be fully turned off for introductions for the first time in Hilton Coliseum history. As Twitter mentions piled up, the marketing staff could tell that anyone not inside of Hilton that night felt like they were missing out, and interest in the following games should increase; in fact, student attendance averaged 77% of capacity for the rest of the season, including two games where the student section reached 96% of capacity, up from 58% before the Kansas game. While this may have been due to the games being part of the conference schedule, the team did suffer through several losses, which had typically hurt attendance in past seasons. These types of promotions are fairly common and in general will lead to a small bump in attendance, but the way they are carried out across social media in real-time and then marketed towards students after the fact can increase their shelf life and lead to gains in student attendance in the future.

### **Listen to Your Students**

Based on the data collected, the student leadership structure at each institution was lauded as being instrumental to the success of their sections, and this recommendation should be adopted by many schools across the country. Ultimately, the best idea generators and critics for each institution when it comes to student attendance will be the current students on campus. Creating an organization that functions like an executive board can have many long-term benefits, even if some challenges are presented from time to time with student input.

At Iowa State, a 12-member board, the Cyclone Alley Committee, works with the athletic department and the Alumni Association to plan events and create an intimidating atmosphere inside of Hilton Coliseum. The co-chairs of the committee also serve on the Athletic Director's Student Advisory Panel, a group that meets every semester to discuss larger issues such as pricing, ticket allotments, and camping out. The AD trusts these students to provide candid



thoughts and feedback, and while their advice is not always implemented, it has become an extremely helpful tool when crafting policy changes; many times, the members of this panel are out in front of the issues, disseminating talking points and engendering support for initiatives among other students. Both Michigan State and Illinois also use student advisory groups to help administer their student sections, and even when things get tense or there are disagreements, the students know that they are part of the discussion. This corresponds to the results of the Greenwell, Brownlee, Jordan, & Popp, which found that “organizations do not necessarily have to give stakeholders total decision control, but rather involve the group or select representatives, in the decision-making process” in order to increase the likelihood of satisfaction and the perception of fairness of the policies (2008, p. 76). All three schools rely on these leaders to assist during game days in getting the section excited and boisterous. This allows the athletic staff to focus on other areas and also creates more of an organic atmosphere since it is led by students, for students.

Whatever format is selected by the school, the students should be empowered to voice their opinions and provide ideas to athletic department staff. Creating an organization that meets regularly, has stated goals, and ownership over certain areas of the game day environment has proven beneficial to many schools, and is a blueprint for success when establishing new policies, procedures, and traditions. Long-term, this should create a pipeline of students who are interested in contributing and have a vested interest in the success of the student section as a whole.

### **Future Studies**

This study could be expanded upon in several ways that would be beneficial to athletic department leaders. Increasing the number of schools examined would lend itself to establishing more trends and examples of policies that have succeeded and failed. Obviously, these three

schools share many similarities, including being Power 5 schools with large budgets and rich histories of success on the hardwood. Expanding the school selection to smaller schools, schools in other parts of the country, and ones where there has not been much basketball success could yield additional insights and recommendations. While it would be interesting, it would also likely require the study method to change to something such as a survey along with open-ended questions, or another quantitative method, in order to examine the large amounts of data that would be offered. A survey similar to the student attendance one, but focused on the athletic department and their goals, motivating factors, and resource allocations could be quite interesting and informative.

Another study that would be beneficial would be a follow-up study of the same schools several years from now to see if the policy changes that were recently implemented were successful or if the administrators found that additional changes were necessary, either due to events at their institution or the industry as a whole. While many departments see constant turnover, this would also lend itself to seeing if traditions and structures employed over many years have lasting impact on the way the department and student section function over time.

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