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Original Article

An Exploratory Study of Best Practices in Corporate Sponsorships within NCAA Division III Intercollegiate Athletics

ROBERT ZULLO
Sports Management, Westminster College, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to identify best practices in Division III intercollegiate athletics corporate sponsorships. Research is readily available on NCAA Division I sports marketing and sponsorships, including the utilization of third-party firms, but studies on Division III corporate sponsorships are non-existent. Exploration into Division III corporate sponsorship is important as a lack of funding and budget constraints are cited as significant challenges in Division III intercollegiate athletics. Division III athletic departments do not have the same revenue streams as their Division I peers in the areas of ticket revenue, television revenue, licensing revenue, fundraising and conference support. Division III athletic departments also frequently work with a leaner staff that includes coaches and administrators assuming multiple responsibilities on their respective campuses. Over 400 schools compete at the Division III level, the largest of the three divisions under the governance of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). A regional strategic sampling method was utilized to create a sample pool of 185 Division III athletic directors from 17 athletic conferences. With 50 Division III athletic directors responding to an online survey, the exploratory research examines such areas as: corporate sponsorship oversight, who on campus can solicit sponsorships, sponsorship inventory, sponsorship tiering systems, set sponsorship rates, pursued business categories and sponsorship evaluation. The study also examines the respondents' beliefs as to why businesses support the athletic department through corporate sponsorships. The findings will contribute to existing literature and help Division III athletic departments better embrace this revenue stream that can address their fiscal challenges.
Keywords: NCAA, Division III, corporate sponsors, sports marketing, best practices

Introduction

Whether a fan is attending a Division I conference football game in person, watching it on television, or listening to it online or on the radio, there is an abundance of corporate sponsorships. Students, fans, and alumni are accustomed to seeing permanent signage, Light-emitting diode (LED) boards and the latest in videoboard technology. Sponsors are routinely highlighted by announcers, in game programs, through on-field or on-court promotions and within corporate villages. This proliferation of sponsor acknowledgement is especially true within the Power Five conferences where athletic budgets can easily surpass $100 million annually, reaching as high as over $200 million for such schools as the University of Texas, Ohio State University, and the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (a.k.a., Texas A&M) (USA Today, n.d.). Sponsorships generate a substantial revenue stream for the athletic departments (Johnson, 2005; Maestas, 2020) in addition to income procured through ticketing, licensing, fundraising, and conference support. Revenue is important for departments to fund scholarships and additional expenses. While it is evident at the Division I level, a question looms regarding whether corporate sponsorships are as prevalent at the Division III level where athletic scholarships do not exist.

The limited research related to sports marketing at the NCAA Division III level primarily addresses attendance motivation. Robinson et al. (2005), for example, examined fans from the four levels of NCAA football and suggested that those attending Division III games are more likely to be spectators instead of fans. The authors argued that Division III supporters do not experience the same level of attachment found at the Division I level. A second study in the domain of NCAA Division III athletics by Perrault (2016) examined students' motivations for attending sporting events finding that existing relationships with peer student-athletes play a vital role in attendance. Research by Robinson (2010) reinforced the notion that there is a significant challenge to attract attendees to Division III games because the fan base and recognition factors are smaller relative to Division I counterparts.

In addition to the limited research on spectator attendance in Division III sports, there are also several studies addressing development efforts. In a 2000 study, Plinske found that the primary donors contributing to Division III athletic fundraising are alumni and parents of student-athletes whose motivation stems from commitment and loyalty. Plinske (2000) suggested that "friend raising" is more important than fundraising at the Division III level because the supporters are buying into more than just athletics. Donors typically embrace the

Corresponding Author: ROBERT ZULLO, E-mail: zullorh@westminster.edu

school as a whole, and not simply athletics. According to Plinske (2000), donors seek integrity, strong academics and a commitment to community.

Plinske (1999) noted that at the Division III level, fundraising emphasizes increasing the donor base and building relationships in order to provide budget relief to athletic departments and Luy (2007) supported the notion that fundraising helps to supplement budget needs and not replace them. Shaw (2004) added that athletic directors at the Division III level are heavily involved in athletic fundraising with their job descriptions noting such. Regardless, fundraising can prove challenging as Barr (2018) indicated that many Division III athletic directors have to balance other duties including coaching and teaching.

Research Questions

While there is existing research on fundraising in Division III intercollegiate athletics, no research exists as to the inclusion of corporate sponsorships at the Division III level. This presents the opportunity to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What inventory is most utilized in athletic sponsorships within Division III?
RQ2: Do Division III schools utilize tiering systems and set rates in their athletic sponsorships?
RQ3: Which categories of businesses are pursued the most for athletic sponsorships at the Division III level?
RQ4: How are athletic sponsorships evaluated at Division III schools?
RQ5: Why do businesses engage with athletic sponsorships at Division III schools?

While an abundance of research is available examining sports marketing and corporate sponsorships at the Division I level these research questions aspire to contribute to the limited literature on Division III sports marketing, especially filling the gap on corporate sponsorships. The findings are important due to the fiscal challenges at the Division III level and will offer best practices to Division III institutions and its administrators.

Review of Related Literature

Limited research on Division III sports marketing is available as the profusion of existing research involving Division III athletics can be broken down into categories unrelated to corporate sponsorship and promotions. Research focuses on such topics as schools adding football (Feezell, 2009; van Holm & Zook, 2016), enrollment (Bandre, 2011; Cooper et al., 2011; Lemoi et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2020; Pauline, 2010; Pauline et al., 2013; Pauline et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2000; Segura & Willner, 2019; Willner, 2019) and retention (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2015). Additional research on Division III emphasizes student identity (Grandzol et al., 2010; Griffith & Johnson, 2002; Katz et al., 2017; Mignano et al., 2006; Sturm et al., 2011) and faculty attitudes towards intercollegiate athletics (Lawrence, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009; Ott, 2011; Williams et al., 2010). Research also explores academic support systems (Porter, 2008; Smith & Herman, 1996), academic course selection (Weight & Huml, 2016) and academic success predictors within Division III schools (Emerson et al., 2009; Robst & Keil, 2000; Scott et al., 2008).

Future Challenges within Division III

Future challenges at the Division III level has been readily researched (Beaver, 2014; Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2011; Crews, 2004; Engbers, 2012; Sparvero & Warner, 2013). A lack of funding and budget constraints are substantial challenges to Division III athletic departments (Crews, 2004; Engbers, 2012; Sparvero & Warner, 2013). In the 2004-2014 and 2011-2015 revenues and expenses studies, Fulks indicated (2015; 2016) that Division III total athletic expenses increased tremendously. Additionally, consideration has been given to adding a fourth grouping beyond Division I, II and III (Snyder & Waterstone, 2015) as the differences between Division III members are escalating. Despite these escalations, most Division III schools utilize athletics as an enrollment strategy (Beaver, 2014), but must also maintain the school's educational mission (Tobin, 2005) and strive to enhance the "town and gown" (Katz & Clopton, 2014) relationship that is more prevalent at the Division I level. Town and gown relationships reflect the town or community that the school is located in while the gown is symbolic for the graduation robes and is representative of the school's students and campus community. The goal is to have a strong relationship between students and the year-long inhabitants of the community.

Research on Division I Sports Marketing

Within college sports research has shown there an emphasis placed on filling the seats at sporting events, enhancing the atmosphere for fans (Lehnus & Miller, 1994; Weight & Zullo, 2015), and institutional branding (Brunswick, 2005). Within Division I intercollegiate athletics presents tremendous advertising platforms for businesses to publicize their business and products through corporate sponsorships. While purists have attempted to postulate that intercollegiate athletics are amateur sports, sponsorship has long been an attractive revenue stream within the industry (Covell, 2001; Cutler, 1999; Gray, 1996; Sneath et al., 2000; Stevens et al., 1995).

Tomasini et al. (2004) indicated that banking/financial and soft drink sponsorships were most prevalent at the Division I level as sponsors strived to achieve success in advertising, building awareness, increasing sales and promoting their products. Weight et al. (2010) presented similar findings to sponsors' motives and indicated that corporate partners sought on-site signage if the advertising cost was reasonable.

Kuzma et al. stressed (2003) the importance of athletic departments being an extension of corporate partners to help businesses maintain a positive relationship with their consumers. This relationship is especially true as it relates to consumer attitudes towards the corporate partners and purchase intentions of the corporate partners' products. Sports marketing administrators have to embrace the sponsors' motives for utilizing corporate partnership, helping businesses reach their objectives. These responsibilities can be challenging when sports marketing departments are tasked with promotional duties, licensing responsibilities and enhancing attendance (Weight & Zullo, 2015). Martin et al. (2011) observed that while sports marketing departments are continuously assessing their strategies to promote and publicize their athletic departments, measuring sponsorship effectiveness can be problematic (Weight et al., 2010). To offset the challenge of evaluation and in order to increase revenue from sponsorships, many Division I athletic departments outsource or utilize third-party firms to focus on the sales efforts (Johnson, 2005; Maestas, 2020) since these firms typically have greater expertise in multi-media rights and demonstrated history in revenue generation.

Research on Outsourcing at the Division I Level

With Host Communication, ESPN Regional, ISP Sports, Learfield Communications, Viacom Sports and other marketing companies bidding to provide their sales expertise to colleges, the potential for enhanced revenue increased (Burden & Li, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Lee & Walsh, 2011). This push for greater revenue was especially true as expectations grew for athletic departments to become more financially self-supporting (Burden & Li, 2003). Though some of these initial companies have consolidated and other companies have emerged, including JMI Sports, OUTFRONT and IMG College, the third-party firms help to deliver sponsors to broadcasts of sporting events, coaches' television and radio shows, permanent and temporary signage, hospitality, intellectual property, inventory on the athletic website, print inventory and a variety of other areas (Maestas, 2020; Zullo et al., 2014).

Collaboration with a third-party firm is a long-term strategical move that must have institutional support and clearly defined outcomes (Burden et al., 2006; Li & Burden, 2002; Walker et al., 2008; Zullo, 2013b). The greatest concern with outsourcing is the loss of control, which is shifted from the athletic department to the third-party marketing firm (Burden & Li, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Walker et al., 2008). Communication between in-house sports marketing directors, employed by the school, and the general managers of the outsourced marketing firm is crucial (Walker et al., 2008). Strong existing relationships between the school and the business community are also important because of the changes that occur when a third-party firm enters the relationship mix (Li & Burden, 2004). Research has also examined future trends such as the pursuit of athletic naming rights (Zullo, 2013a) in addition to the firms' perspective (Bouchet, 2010; Zullo et al., 2014) including the challenges with escalating guarantees paid to schools and the business categories that have been most successful in Division sponsorship pursuit.

Research on Division II Sports Marketing

Within Division II intercollegiate athletics, limited research exists on sports marketing. Research has focused on scholarship factors relate to attendance at Division II football games (Brokaw, 2000; DeSchriver et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2000) and basketball games (Choi et al., 2009). There is also literature on the value of utilizing social media as a marketing platform to increase ticket and merchandise purchases (Mason et al., 2017). Additionally, Zullo (2018) identified specific marketing and publicity strategies including sponsorship inventory, promotional themes and advertising approaches applicable to Division II athletics. Despite these studies, research on Division III sports marketing, especially corporate sponsorships, is almost non-existent.

Materials and Methods

With over 400 schools competing at the NCAA Division III level of intercollegiate athletics, the following 17 conferences were included through regional strategic sampling for a sample size of 185 schools: Allegheny Mountain Collegiate Conference (AMCC), Atlantic East Conference (AEC), Capital Athletic Conference (CAC), Centennial Conference (CC), Colonial States Athletic Conference (CSAC), Empire 8 Conference (E8), Heartland Collegiate Athletic Conference (HCAC), Landmark Conference (LAND), Liberty League Athletic Conference (Liberty), Middle Atlantic Conference (MAC), New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC), North Coast Athletic Conference, (NCAC), North Eastern Athletic Conference (NEAC), Ohio Athletic Conference (OAC), Old Dominion Athletic Conference (ODAC), Presidents' Athletic Conference (PAC), and USA South Athletic Conference (USA South). These schools offered variation in enrollment, athletic success and a mixture of public and private schools in regional proximity to the researcher.

Researching each school's athletic website, a database of the 185 athletic directors' names and e-mails was developed. Athletic directors were e-mailed a letter explaining the study and a link to an online Qualtrics survey of fifteen questions. Qualtrics was used because of the ease of distribution, data analysis capabilities and the ability to track which athletic director did or did not respond. Each school's identity was protected to ensure confidentiality and to enhance the response rate. To enhance confidence and strengthen reliability in the data, surveys were sent in the same time frame (Andrew et al., 2011). The online survey was utilized for greater ease for the participant, personalization, higher external validity, and the ability to remind participants about the importance of their contributions to the greater findings thereby strengthening participation numbers (Dillman, 2000; Reips, 2000). Veal also observed (2006) that the utilization of a survey enhances objectivity, enables the consolidation of mass information and assists in future longitudinal studies being conducted.

Past studies by Tomasini et al. (2004) and Zullo et al. (2014) helped to shape the questions in the survey instrument as their studies examined such areas as objectives, sponsorship inventory, and categories. Collaboration with Division III athletic and college administrators also helped to create the survey instrument, thereby enhancing the content validity. Questions included a combination of closed-ended responses and open-ended responses. Collected data and quantitative responses were tabulated and analyzed. Qualitative responses were analyzed (Dittmore, 2011), but no significant common themes emerged from the limited responses to the open-ended questions).

Results

Fifty of the 185 invited schools fully completed the survey yielding a response rate of 27 percent. Of the 50 respondents, 48 athletic departments (96%) at the Division III level utilize corporate sponsorships.

Oversight of Corporate Sponsorships and Solicitation

Respondents were asked who is responsible for athletic sponsorships and were permitted to select one response. Athletic directors were the primary response with 28 and institutional advancement and sports information were a distant second (6 responses) and third (4 responses). There were 10 answers in the "other" open-ended responses including: athletic budget committee (*AD, Associate, Title IX Coordinator, VP Finance, VP Development*), formerly an Associate AD, Assistant Baseball Coach, Manager of Athletic Administration, Associate AD, Director of Athletic Communication, AD has final say but coaches with relationships bring opportunities to the table, mix between AD and Development, in collaboration with AD and no response.

When asked which staff members could pursue athletic sponsorships, respondents indicated that athletic directors were the primary solicitor (43). However, institutional advancement office staff members (29), head coaches (25) and the sports information director (17) were also frequently engaged in the pursuit of corporate partners. Other responses included assistant coaches (7), associate athletic director (4), manager of athletic administration and designated coach/athletic staff member.

Sponsorship Inventory for Corporate Sponsorships

The first research question asked what inventory is most utilized in athletic sponsorships in Division III. Signage, game program and website banners were the most common inventory as respondents were able to check all that apply and add their own responses. The responses were also reflective of which inventory was not as readily utilized. Three responses were included under 'other,' reflecting how open-ended responses were useful in garnering answers not listed.

Table 1: What inventory is typically available in athletic sponsorships?	
Temporary signage (ex. banner)	46
Permanent signage (ex. scoreboard, video board)	42
Game program	41
Website banner	40
Game-day promotions (on-court/on-field/half-times)	33
Live streaming	30
Social media	27
Naming rights for facilities	27
Naming rights for games/tournaments	25
Radio broadcast of the game	21
Giveaways	19
Schedule card	12
Hospitality	10
TV broadcast of the game	9
Product sampling	8
Coaches radio show	5
Kids' club	5
eSports	4
Inclusion in student/fan rewards program	4
Coaches TV show	3
Intramurals	2
Other	3
Other - In-game announcements/promos - Cannot do major sponsorships for naming rights on facilities without approval from Advancement and administration: not approved for that so far - Fundraising Events	

Tiering Systems and Set Rates in Corporate Sponsorships

The second research question asked do Division III schools utilized tiering systems and set rates in their athletic sponsorships. First, respondents were inquired as to whether they tiered their athletic sponsorships. Thirty-one respondents indicated yes and seventeen indicated no. They were asked to share their tiering models *("If you do tier, what is your tiering model (Ex: how many tiers, what inventory and what rates)?),* but no consistent patterns in the tiering models emerged from the open-ended question. Six respondents utilized three tiers, four respondents utilized four tiers, two respondents utilized five tiers and one respondent indicated six tiers. A few respondents did creatively utilize athletic-related names in their tiering structure such as Champion, First Team and Hall of Fame, but responses on tier's pricing and including sponsorship inventory were inconsistent and was therefore not included.

Second, respondents were also queried if they had set rates for sponsorships. Twenty-eight respondents indicated yes and twenty respondents indicated no. Again, respondents were asked to share their rates *("Could you list your rates per each available inventory?")*, but no consistent patterns in pricing per inventory item emerged in the open-end question. Therefore this data was also not included.

Business Categories to Pursue for Corporate Sponsorships

The third research question asked which categories of businesses are pursued the most for athletic sponsorships at the Division III level. Table 2 reflects on the categories that have been utilized by Division III athletic departments within the last three years. Respondents could check all that apply and indicate their own responses under 'other.' Hotels, sit down restaurants, pizza and banking were the four most popular categories. The responses also reflect on the lesser utilized sponsorship categories.

Table 2: What sponsorship categories have you used/filled within the last three years?	
Hotel	35
Sit down restaurants	34
Pizza	33
Bank	29
Subs and sandwiches	24
Car dealership	24
Fast food	22
Insurance	22
Medical (ex. Hospital, doctor's office, urgent care, etc.)	22
Sporting goods store	18
Coffee shop or house	11
Automotive repair	8
Hardware or home improvement	7
Grocery store	7
Retailer (ex. Walmart)	6
Convenience store	5
Shopping mall or department stores	4
Movie theater	2
Service lube	2
Other	13
Other - Adidas – official outfitters - Again, we just revamped this. So, the last three years is not an indication of where we are looking to advertise. - Tourism authority, utilities department - Construction company, office supply company - Investment services, Physical therapy, Credit unions - Beverage: Pespo (Pepsi) - Companies already doing business with - Financial planners, heating and air, printing companies, labor unions, accounting firms, cleaning companies, NIKE/BSN - Landscape company - Construction companies - Travel companies, media outlets - No response (2)	

Sponsor Assessment and Motives in Corporate Sponsorships

The fourth research question asked how are athletic sponsorships evaluated at Division III schools. Respondents could check all that apply in measuring sponsorship success for the businesses and also add in their own responses under "other." As indicated in Table 3, quantitative measurements received the higher responses including online viewership, website impressions, social media engagement and attendance at events. The responses also reflect on the lesser utilized sponsorship assessment tools. However, the significant decrease in the quantity of top responses to this question suggest that some athletic departments do not engage in measuring sponsorship success for their corporate partners.

Table 3: How do you measure sponsorship success for the business.	
Online viewership (radio, television, other)	28
Website impressions	27
Social media engagement	26
Attendance at events	23
Branding sponsors into the market place (ex. schedule cards, posters, homecoming schedule with sponsorship, etc. displayed in area of business)	14
Coupons redeemed at businesses	12
Programs (sold or printed)	9
Earned media (local, regional or national print, radio, Internet, television, social media coverage)	4
Survey of fans	3
Applicants for contests	1
Other	7
Other - Their (company) own evaluation of their benefits and renewal decision - It just depends on the desired impact the sponsor was hoping to achieve - Word of mouth, community awareness - We don't. We let them decide if it's worth it. So far most of our businesses are renewing. - Enhancements to operating budgets - We think they measure on volume of business we do with them. Essentially, we prioritize directing our own spend with our partners. - No response	

The fifth and final research question asked why do businesses engage with athletic sponsorships at Division III schools. Respondents were asked their beliefs as to why businesses would want to sponsor the school's Division III athletic department. Respondents could check all that apply and add in their own responses under "other" as noted in Table 4. Being a community partner, relationship with coaches/program and college alumni were the top three responses, ahead of school pride and return on marketing investment.

Table 4: Why do you believe that businesses want to sponsor your athletic department?	
Community partner	46
Relationship with coaches or partner with programs	33
College alumni	33
School pride	27
Return on their marketing investment	27
Other	3
Other - College contract - beverage - Brand association - Affiliation with the university and some visibility	

Discussion

The implications of the findings are that corporate sponsorships should be utilized within Division III intercollegiate athletics as a strategy to offset escalating costs (Fulks, 2015; Fulks, 2016; Sparvero & Warner, 2013) and budget constraints (Crews, 2004; Engbers, 2012; Luy, 2007). Of the 50 respondents from the sample size of 185 Division III athletic directors, 48 (96%) utilized corporate sponsorships.

The first research question asked what inventory is most utilized in athletic sponsorships within Division III and as noted in Table 1 that is signage, both permanent and temporary, game programs and website banners. Gameday-day promotions, live streaming, social media and naming rights for facilities/games/tournaments present additional inventory options. These findings are consistent with previous literature that exists on sponsorship inventory at the Division I (Maestas, 2020; Zullo et al., 2014) and Division II level (Zullo, 2018). At the Division I level, outsourced marketing firms felt that radio broadcast of games, signage and video board/ribbon were the best selling inventory, followed by print media and game-day promotions (Zullo et al., 2014). In a more recent study, Maestas (2020) found that signage, intellectual property and hospitality were preferred inventory at the Division I level while signage, giveaways and on-court/field promotions were the preferred inventory at the Division II level (Zullo, 2018). Table 1 lists the inventory traditionally utilized in Division III intercollegiate athletics.

In forthcoming studies, the opportunity to examine why certain inventory is more popular exists, though it is hypothesized that these are the preferred choices by businesses. However, the inventory's popularity could also be attributed to the ease in sponsorship activation or to a Division III athletic department's limited resources in terms of technology and/or staff size needed for successful sponsorship fulfillment.

The second research question asked do Division III schools utilize tiering systems and set rates in their athletic sponsorships. Schools tend to utilize tiering systems though evidence suggests that set rates for inventory are not as prevalent among the respondents. Greater research is needed into school's tiering models and set rates for the most common inventory noted in Table 1. Set rates need to be assessed with consideration for the school's enrollment, location, athletic success and other variables. Research into tiering and rates can help to ensure fair market value for athletic departments in their sponsorships as businesses have a wide range of advertising platforms available. Finding time to continuously research fair market value may prove challenging due to time constraints. Barr (2018) indicated that many Division III athletic directors have administrative duties in addition to caching and/or teaching.

The third research question asked what categories of businesses are pursued the most for athletic sponsorships at the Division III level. While research exists on sponsorship categories utilized within Division I (Tomasini et al., 2004; Zullo et al., 2014), this is new research into the Division III level. Tomasini found that Division I-A schools were more likely to work with the categories of soft drink partner, bank/financial, telephone/cell, automotive and health/hospital. In a later study, other restaurants, fast food, hotel, soda/cola, banking, cellular service provider, car insurance, hospital/medical center and grocery store were the top categories (Zullo et al., 2014). The business categories of hotels, sit down restaurant, pizza and bank were the top responses of this study into Division III sponsorships. The findings of this study, as noted in Table 2, can help athletic departments prioritize which businesses to initially pursue and which to pursue as time permits.

Shaw (2004) notes that Division III athletic directors are already active in fundraising and their increased involvement in corporate sponsorship would enhance revenue streams. Athletic directors are familiar with the needs of the athletic department and making a case for the support of external stakeholders. Division III athletic fundraising accentuates increasing the donor base and relationship building (Plinske, 1999). The same philosophy can be applied to corporate sponsorships. Increasing the number of corporate partners can be achieved though utilizing relationship building with the wide range of business categories indicated in the research findings in Table 2. However, this prospecting and procuring of corporate partners is just another responsibility for the Division III athletic director that may already be coaching, teaching and leading an educational department (Barr, 2018).

The fourth research question asked how are athletic sponsorships evaluated at Division III schools. Previous research (Tomasini et al., 2004) indicates that athletic administrators at the Division I-A level may be more proficient in helping corporate sponsors achieve their market objectives. Conversely, a study of mid-major athletic departments (Weight et al., 2010) found that sponsorship evaluation is not easily accomplished and outsourced marketing firms indicated that demonstrating return on investment for their partners and clients is one of the top concerns (Zullo et al., 2014). Quantitative measures, as indicated in Table 3, are most frequently used as assessments tools in evaluating sponsorship success at the Division III level. However, the highest response level (28) in Table 3 was not on par with the total number of schools that utilize corporate sponsorships (48). This disparity presents an opportunity for further research.

The fifth and final research question asked why do businesses engage with athletic sponsorships at Division III schools. At the Division I level sponsorships can help corporate partners increase company/brand awareness, increase sales, reinforce/establish image and increase new customers (Weight et al. 2010). As listed in Table 4, being a community partner, relationship with coaches/program and college alumni were the top three responses as to why businesses sponsor Division III athletic departments. The relationships developed with the business community through corporate sponsorships can facilitate stronger "town and gown" relationships that can also be a challenge to develop at the Division III level (Katz & Clopton, 2014). However, it is suggested that pursuit of businesses emulate the "friend raising" strategy recommended by Plinske (2000) to achieve an outcome of long-term "town and gown" relationships versus the traditional business and market objectives observed at the Division I level of sponsorships.

Recommendations for Practitioners

The following are recommendations based from respondents that can be embraced by Division III athletic administrators and their counterparts in institutional advancement to enhance best practices in corporate sponsorships. Though the revenue streams may not approach their Division I peers, the additional funds and in-kinds can help with the athletic budget.

1. Offer a variety of inventory options in differing price ranges.
2. Utilize a rate card to share sponsorship tier systems and help in consistency of pricing.
3. Strategically focus on some categories more than others but do not ignore opportunities to work with parents, family members and past alumni letter-winners, especially in those lesser sought-after business categories that could provide financial support or in-kind through corporate partnerships.
4. Demonstrate quantitative return on investment to corporate partners to enhance relationships.

Implementing these recommendations and evaluating the corporate sponsorship program on a regular basis can help to ensure best practices at the Division III level including fairness, consistency and professionalism. If multiple staff members are engaged in procuring athletic sponsorships these recommendations will only enhance the efficiency of the corporate partnership program.

Conclusion

Division III athletic departments face many challenges, including fiscal stability. Embracing corporate partnerships can assist to alleviate some of these concerns if sponsorship programs fit the institution's mission and core values (Bouchet & Hutchinson, 2011; Engbers, 2012), emphasizing academics to athletics. Beaver (2014) and Tobin (2005) offer caution to avoid the "arms race" and "win at all cost" mentality that can permeate, even at the Division III level of intercollegiate athletics.

If the research were conducted again, the sample size could be expanded to include all Division III schools. Additionally, respondents would be asked to indicate their school's enrollment size and athletic budget. A 2015 NCAA study on institutional characteristics found the mean undergraduate enrollment for Division III schools to be 2,602 students. However, twenty-one percent of the schools had enrollments between 3,000 and 9,999 students, while two percent had enrollments over 10,000 students (NCAA, n.d.). With Division III enrollment sizes ranging from hundreds of students on a campus to an enrollment of over 30,000 (Crews, 2004), future research can examine whether enrollment size or school location (by region) impact responses.

Research could also explore why certain inventory is more embraced, why set sponsorship rates are not more prevalent and why some business categories are more popular than others in Division III intercollegiate athletics. Another study could also inquire as to why assessment of corporate sponsorships is not a priority within Division III intercollegiate athletics given the disparity between schools utilizing sponsors and the responses found in Table 3. Nonetheless, the exploratory study addresses the numerous research questions, begins to fill the literature gap on Division III sports marketing, and helps colleges and universities to incorporate best practices in corporate sponsorships on their respective campuses to alleviate some of the significant current challenges.

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