Implementing a Ticket Sales Force in College Athletics: A Decade of Challenges

Adrien Bouchet, Khalid Ballouli, and Gregg Bennett

Adrien Bouchet, PhD, is the Warren Clinic Endowed Chair Professor, Sport Administration in the Collins College of Business at the University of Tulsa. His research interests include the study of revenue generation and management and marketing strategy. Khalid Ballouli is a doctoral student in the Division of Sport Management at Texas A&M University. His research interests include brand marketing and entertainment. Gregg Bennett, EdD, is an associate professor of sport management and the director of the Sport Marketing Laboratory and the Center for Sport Management Education and Research at Texas A&M University. His primary research interest is in the area of effective event marketing.

Abstract
This research explores the challenges of developing a ticket sales force within a collegiate athletic department by investigating the difficulties one BCS college faced over the course of a decade amidst the implementation and management of a ticket sales force. The athletic department at the University of Miami was the first of its kind to establish a ticket sales force similar to that of professional sports organizations in that it would constitute its own directors and management team within the department. Like many metropolitan universities, the University of Miami athletic department faced challenging marketing conditions. Its locale offered unique marketing and sales opportunities for the athletic department to better leverage the visibility of their athletic programs and increase the overall attendance at university sporting events. Using qualitative collection methods and coding analysis techniques, this research explores the methods used by the University of Miami athletic department to increase ticket sales revenue from the time a ticket sales force was established to the time of its demise. Propositions regarding the successful implementation and management of ticket sales operations within college athletic departments are provided to help guide future research in the area of sport ticket sales and collegiate athletics. Though generalizing how athletic departments function can be difficult, the authors believe the findings of this research provide a useful framework for further research into this line of inquiry. Practical implications as well as avenues for potential research are also forwarded.

Introduction
A primary goal of a university athletic department is the development and support of marketing initiatives conducive to the generation of revenue. Athletic departments achieve growth through a variety of revenue streams, such as broadcasting rights, multimedia rights, stadium concessions, corporate sponsorships, individual donations, merchandise sales, and ticket sales (Leeds & Von Allmen, 2001; Gladden & Milne, 1999). With regard to broadcasting rights, the regional athletic conference within which university athletic programs compete typically controls much of the profitable returns accrued from locally and nationally televised conference sporting events (Fitzel & Fort, 2004). For most institutions, the revenue generated from multimedia rights and stadium concessions are relatively negligible due to the frequent outsourcing of services to third-party providers (Shughart, 2010). Whereas corporate sponsorships and individual donations can vary drastically from year to year depending on the status of the program (Rosenthal, 2003), the sales of sport event tickets remain the foremost revenue stream over which the athletic department has direct control (James & Ross, 2004). Thus, athletic departments must continuously develop innovative ways to increase ticket sales revenue.

Though ticket sales represent the greatest stream of revenue for college athletic departments (Fulks, 2000), there has been a dearth of sales force initiatives at the university level focused exclusively on ticket sales of university sporting events. Whereas professional sport
organizations use original and adaptive sales force strategies to promote and sell tickets to their organization's own sport events both leading up to and during the course of a season, athletic departments at the university level for the most part do not attempt to implement any kind of comparable sales force initiatives (Sutton, 2004). According to Sutton (2004, p. 30), it is confounding as to "why the employment of such a seasonal sales force is not a common practice among college athletic departments." In this study, we explore the reasons why sales force initiatives similar to those within professional sports were not prevalent in one university athlete department. In doing so, we also examine the unique challenges one athletic department faced when implementing such common practices found in the professional sport industry.

**Sales Force Management**

Slater and Olson (2000) state that sales force management is "a key functional activity and should contribute to the successful implementation of business strategy" (p. 813). Professional teams in major sport leagues such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL) rely heavily on ticket sales as one of their primary sources of income (Irwin, Sutton, & McCarthy, 2008; Howard & Crompton, 2004a). Similarly, many sport organizations in the recreation and leisure industry (e.g., golf courses, ski resorts) are also dependent upon admission charges as a foremost source of revenue. However, Howard and Crompton (2004b) found that at the collegiate level of sports, revenue accrued from ticket sales summed to merely 30% of total income generated by athletic departments. According to Coughlin and Erekson (1984), such low figures can be explained by the increasing cost pressures existing at the university level to increase funding for non-revenue sports in college athletics. Consequently, these pressures have forced athletic departments to increase their efforts and resources primarily on the pursuit of increasing revenue from corporate sponsorships and individual donations (Rosenthal, 2003).

The challenges facing the implementation and management of a ticket sales force in an environment such as a university athletic department are pervasive (Slater & Olson, 2000). Foremost among these challenges is a fostering commitment from department athletic directors to provide managerial and financial support to ticket sales operations. Athletic departments are, for the most part, operated rather differently than professional sport organizations, primarily due to the fact that other considerations regarding university support (e.g., student fees) and revenue generation (e.g., donations) generally exist (Sutton, 2004). Because of the various other revenue streams that exist, initiatives to increase revenue through innovative ticket sales operations have been, for the most part, overlooked by many athletic departments.

There is a relative paucity of research in sport marketing that investigates the nexus between college and professional sports. Much of the extant literature in the field addresses various topics specifically related to one or the other domain. In the current research, we attempt to fill the gap in this area by exploring the challenges faced by athletic department personnel in implementing and managing a ticket sales force similar to that found in professional sports. The study findings led to a set of propositions outlined herein about the conditions necessary for successful management of ticket sales operations within a university athletic department. The propositions were derived through a process of data collection and analysis that included direct observations of athletic department operations gathered over the course of a decade at the University of Miami (UM), as well as personal interviews with UM athletic department managers in charge of managing and supervising ticket sales operations within the department during the time period of the study.

**Implementing a Ticket Sales Force in College Athletics**

This research involves the observation and exploration of a small, private university that participates in Division I level collegiate athletics. UM is a private research university located just south of the heart of Miami in the suburb of Coral Gables. The athletic department at UM, a member of the Atlantic Coast Conference and as such eligible for the Bowl Championship Series (BCS), has enjoyed resurgence in the last 30 years due primarily to the national championships won by the university's football (1983, 1987, 1989, 1991, 2001) and baseball (1982, 1985, 1999, 2001) programs. However, much like other college athletic programs, the UM athletic department has recently been faced with numerous challenges with regard to cost pressures and revenue generation. Due to its private university status, for instance, UM has a relatively undersized student population and alumni following relative to their BCS counterparts. The small size of the student body has moved UM athletic department administration to market its athletic programs to sports consumers outside the university in the greater South Florida region, particularly the metropolitan area of Miami. The key issue UM and many other athletic departments face is how to drive ticket sales and impact revenue.

During the summer of 1999, athletic department managers made the decision to aggressively market...
UM's athletic programs to students, alumni, and potential fans of the university living in the region. Managers were aware of the disadvantages UM faced in competing with the professional sport teams also located within and near the region and realized they needed new expertise in the area of ticket sales operations. Consequently, the university hired the sports marketing firm Integrated Sports International (ISI) (later purchased by SFX Sports) to a two-year contract during which ISI was to effectively administer the implementation of an innovative sales force within the athletic department that focused exclusively on outbound ticket sales of all UM athletic events. The first year of the contract ISI designed, hired, and trained a ticket sales force to sell season tickets and personal seat licenses for UM's new $48 million basketball arena, the Ryder Center (now known as Bank United Center). This on-campus arena was owned and operated by the university and served various functions including the hosting of university graduations, live entertainment events, trade shows, as well as other local and national sporting events.

In 2001, ISI's contract with the university ended, and the ticket sales force was turned over to a newly hired assistant athletic director brought in specifically to handle ticket sales operations. Over the course of the next five years, the ticket sales force remained intact, although it experienced some attrition within the athletic department that would ultimately weaken the university's sales efforts.

In the summer of 2007, the university announced that all home football games would be played at Dolphin Stadium (now known as Sun Life Stadium), the home stadium for the Miami Dolphins of the National Football League (NFL). The stadium was located approximately 20 miles north of the UM campus, and offered the UM athletic department additional potential streams of revenue including club and luxury seating. Additionally, the move of UM football games to a professional stadium provided the university athletic department with new marketing advantages and strategies, such as promoting sporting events to a larger target audience, providing regional fans with a more centralized stadium location, and building a greater affiliation with the professional franchises in the area among local sports fans.

However, the university also faced challenges regarding the move. Among those challenges were the distance between the new stadium and campus as well as a perception that the school would be the third tenant in a stadium that also housed the Dolphins and Marlins. The latter point was especially difficult for loyal fans that were used to UM being the only major tenant in the Orange Bowl. Following this announce-
UM. During that time the author kept a reflective journal (Steier, 1991) in which he made and recorded notable observations and field notes related to the implementation and management of the UM ticket sales force. Guba and Lincoln (1982) contend that regular reflection helps maintain quality and consistency of the data while it is being collected. To this end, tape-recorded and handwritten field notes were transcribed to a word processing journal after each period of fieldwork. The findings derived from the ethnographic observations were congruent with the responses and reflections obtained from the interviews conducted in the first portion of the study. This was justified by a third-party review of the data.

Data Analysis

Using qualitative techniques outlined by Creswell (2003), data analysis consisted of coding observations and interview responses to allow patterns that appeared as common across the data to emerge. The recurring patterns were then organized into meaningful thematic categories, from which point an interpretative analysis technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) was used to identify the major themes inherent within the data. On the whole, the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data were consistent with the research objectives derived by authors from preliminary analysis of ethnographic observations.

The qualitative methods of triangulation and member checking were also applied using techniques used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure data validity and reliability within the study. According to Patton (1990), triangulation can be used to establish corroborating evidence in support of preliminary analyses of the study data. The process of member checking involved the verification of the interpretations of the data by study respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) so that any appropriate changes to the interview transcripts could be made. In an effort to safeguard participant identity and preserve confidentiality, pseudonyms were substituted for participant names throughout the remainder of the study.

Results

The results of this study reveal various costly practices by the UM athletic department that ultimately affected the management of ticket sales operations. The findings also indicate that specific conditions are often necessary in order for ticket sales management to be successful. Data analysis revealed thematic categories that were consistent across interview responses and reflective journal entries. These categories include: sales staff experience, effective channels of communication, sports venue relocation, and performance-based initiatives. Each of these categories effectively captured the nuances of the interplay between athletic department directors and ticket sales personnel from the unique perspectives of these individuals.

Sales Experience

The effects of managerial changes within an athletic department normally include various changes in strategies and policies. Whereas some managers might value the education of the student-athlete, thus making financial resources available for educational purposes, other managers might believe in the influence a new workout facility has on recruiting highly touted high school athletes to the university. Although tickets sales are the lifeblood of revenue generation and thus a major priority for many professional sports teams, our research demonstrates that managers in collegiate athletics do not always share this sentiment. According to our findings, the priorities that take precedence within an athletic department will depend heavily on the extent to which managerial changes occur. While the same can be said concerning professional sports teams, the profit-driven strategies of professional organizations helps keep managerial decisions focused on sales revenue. Due to the many nuances inherent in the non-profit university system, such is often not the case in college athletic departments. In the case of UM, data gathered from regular observation revealed that the development and implementation of ticket sales operations was hindered due to numerous changes in priorities at the senior level of athletic department administration, where managers were reluctant to engage in the daily operations characteristic of outbound ticket sales initiatives seen at the professional level of sports. As two administrators noted:

Selling tickets is hard work. By the time most athletic department employees get to senior level status they don't want to manage anything having to do with ticket sales. They would rather seek corporate donations, or generate revenue in other ways. When you hang with corporate donors, you get to sit in the seats, not try to sell them.

(Matthew)

I didn’t mind selling tickets when I was first brought into athletics. But it’s not want anyone wants to be doing for very long. It’s not that ticket sales is unimportant; its just that very few people want to do it in college sports. Everyone just crosses their fingers and hopes that the students will fill up the place.

(Brian)

The changes in department priorities were made evident due to the persistent turnover at the senior level within the athletic department. During the span of this
research, four different individuals in as few as 10 years filled the position of associate athletic director of external relations, a position that was integral to the lifespan of the athletic department’s ticket sales operations. According to our findings, the individuals hired were not trained in sales and brought little ticket sales experience to the position. Further, interview respondents acknowledged that the only practical knowledge brought by the individuals hired had been obtained in fundraising corporate partnerships. While this sort of sales experience is indeed a benefit for colleges, it differed significantly for the sales staff of UM from the skills needed to manage a ticket sales force. One sales staff member claimed:

Selling a million-dollar account is no easier or harder than selling a stadium seat. But I can assure you that the skills used to do both are extremely different. The problem becomes that when everybody is good at selling one thing, no one is able to sell the other. (Sarah)

As discussed above, committed efforts to establishing strategic initiatives regarding ticket sales is directly related to the priorities set forth by the current administration. As such, the ticket sales initiatives implemented by the UM athletic department were short lived due to the frequency with which assistant and associate athletic directors were replaced. Such a turnover among upper-level administration did not allow managers of ticket sales operations to maintain a consistent strategy due to the various differences in priorities and tactics brought about by each subsequent change. Consistent with this finding, we offer the following:

**Proposition 1.** Frequent turnover at the senior leadership levels of a collegiate athletic department and the resulting changes in priorities and tactics may adversely affect the chances of a ticket sales force succeeding.

Furthermore, the lack of experience in ticket sales among the majority of the sales staff and administration was a hindering factor revealed by those interviewed. As evidenced from reflexive journal data, the individuals that occupied executive positions in the UM athletic department had little prior experience with ticket sales, and often opened up about their concern with how operations involving the selling of tickets were being conducted. As one senior administrator and salesperson stated,

Very few senior level administrators had any prior experience with ticket sales, so it was tough on all of us having to experience the taxing efforts that go into managing and operating a full sales staff. (Matthew)

It’s not that we weren’t provided any direction; it’s just that the direction we were provided wasn’t one worth following. We were hoping for some insights and shortcuts that only experienced salesmen could provide. We didn’t get much of that. (Peter)

Provided the preceding statements, and given that ticket sales initiatives are still relatively new phenomena in college athletics, we hypothesize that many senior associate athletic directors will feel apprehension managing a ticket sales force and revenue stream with which they have relatively insignificant experience. Our second proposition offers insight into the promotional process of college athletics through which many senior-level administrators charged with managing ticket sales operations had limited experience concerning ticket sales. It states:

**Proposition 2.** As a result of limited experience in business operations related to ticket sales at the senior leadership levels of college athletics, commitment to establishing a ticket sales force will be hindered.

**Effective Channels of Communication**

Most sport organizations do not function in an entirely formal or structured environment. In fact, many organizations have effective strategies in place that create channels of communication outside the hierarchical structure. According to our findings, however, the channels that exist between various operations within an athletic department do not always function as efficiently as an organizational chart might imply. Interview respondents revealed that UM ticket sales personnel reported to the associate athletic director of external relations, whereas ticket operations personnel reported directly to the chief financial officer for the athletic department. Respondents acknowledged that this misdirection of pertinent information regarding ticket sales created delays in the channels of communication and effectively thwarted much of the productivity of ticket sales staff. Supporting this claim, two salespersons noted:

It was a constant struggle to balance the lines of communication throughout the department. We answered to the external relations department, but the finance department signed all of our checks and wanted to be constantly updated on our progress. (Sarah)

Our scenario would have worked much better if we had strong central leadership. Perhaps a Chief Operating Officer or Executive Associate A.D. that could have brought everyone together and gotten us all on the same page. (Jason)

Observation data revealed the circumvention of authoritative lines of command became problematic within the athletic department. This was evidenced by the various circumstances that were recorded in which senior-level administrators would make significant
decisions regarding ticket sales operations without knowledge or understanding of the issues. In addition to these data, interview respondents also claimed that ticket sales initiatives were not successful because the channels of communication between senior-level administrators and sales force personnel did not function in a seamless manner. Respondents accredited the poor communication that existed within the department to a lack of effectiveness and efficiency in sales operations during the time period studied. Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 3. Proper communication and direct lines of report between senior athletic department personnel and sales force personnel will help the effectiveness and efficiency of a ticket sales force.

Sports Venue Construction, Relocation, or Renovation

The commitment to an outbound ticket sales strategy was fostered during the years that the university constructed a new basketball arena and moved all home UM football games to Dolphin Stadium, home stadium of the professional NFL franchise Miami Dolphins. At the time, the majority of college teams competed in smaller, older stadiums and arenas. The athletic department put a positive spin on the move, citing the chance for college athletes to play in a professional venue, luxury suites, better concessions, and ample bathrooms. According to field notes taken during the time of the move, there was a minority of fans that voiced concerns about leaving the Orange Bowl; still, the majority of fans were excited about the prospects of the school playing on campus the athletic department and university places a priority on attendance. (Jason)

Before we built the on-campus arena (Ryder Center), we played our home games downtown and nobody cared about attendance. Now that we play on campus the athletic department and university places a priority on attendance. (Jason)

I was emphatic about selling seats at the stadium. We had no choice but to be aggressive regarding ticket sales. We did not have the benefit of a large alumni base to draw from, and we had to compete against the professional teams in our city. (Peter)

Though the temporary increase in sales staff morale was beneficial (data show that sales were highest after venue moves/renovations), athletic departments would benefit from a more consistent ticket sales strategy. In many cases, the university and athletic department have invested financial resources into the construction of older facilities and still look to these venues for positive streams of revenue. Under circumstances when new facility construction or venue relocation is not feasible, relying simply on the existing fan base to purchase tickets is often not enough. Consistent with these findings, we propose:

Proposition 4. A greater commitment to ticket sales force strategies will be fostered during a time when changes in sport venues and construction of new facilities are present.

Performance-Based Initiatives

In his classic management study, Kerr (1975) notes the importance of tying an organization’s rewards system with the organization’s goals. He states that managers suffering from low employee motivation “might do well to consider the possibility that they have installed reward systems which are paying off for behaviors other than those they are seeking” (Kerr, 1975, p. 781). However, in the case of UM, preparing a reward system that incentivizes a successful sales force in an athletic department has proven equally elusive.

Individuals occupying sales positions have an inherent responsibility to maintain high levels of performance in regard to successful sales strategy. Salespersons thrive in performance driven sales environments where variable incentives in the form of commissions and bonuses are most commonly found (Krafft, 1999). Within the professional sports industry, commissions on ticket sales earn the salesperson a percentage of whatever the sports organization earns. In addition, Krafft (1999) explains that business firms will rightly undertake a diagnostic assessment of sales force personnel to benchmark the current level of performance and reward those salespersons who were productive with bonuses.

Some of the challenges facing ticket sales operations in college athletics exist because many state-supported universities have bylaws forbidding administration to grant commissions or bonuses to employee staff. As a private school, UM was not required to satisfy these provisions, therefore the athletic department was able to provide some financial resources beyond regular

Volume 20 • Number 2 • 2011 • Sport Marketing Quarterly 89
base pay salaries for ticket sales positions. One senior
level athletic department official stated:

As a private school we can do almost anything
regarding compensation, although I don't like the
idea of paying commissions. Public schools would
have a much tougher time getting the OK for a
commission-based sales staff. (Brian)

According to interviewees, the commissions and
bonuses that were offered to sales force personnel
attracted applicants who brought a greater intensity
and work ethic to the job. However, interviewees also
acknowledged that given the poor development of
compensation plans, newly hired ticket salespersons
quickly learned of the pitfalls inherent within the ath-
etic department's business infrastructure. As discussed
previously, changes in department administration
during the time period studied created difficulties in
maintaining a consistent strategy for ticket sales opera-
tions. For instance, observation data revealed that dur-
ing the decade in which the sales operations were
studied, at least three different commission systems
were put in place. As such, hired salespersons continu-
ally had to adjust to policy changes within the depart-
ment that directly affected employee sales
compensation and incentives. One longtime sales
employee noted:

We were never consistent with our philosophy
or with the compensation structure. One day foot-
ball season tickets were the priority and commis-
sions were high, the next they cut our commissions
and relax on selling season tickets. It's like the mis-
ion changed year to year. (Jason)

Consistent with these findings, we propose the fol-
lowing propositions concerning sales staff commis-
sions:

Proposition 5. Maintaining a committed sales staff
will be challenged in college athletic departments
because of the reluctance of most universities to pay
competitive base salaries and sales commissions rela-
tive to those in the professional sports industry.

Proposition 6. Incentive-based sales commissions in
college athletic departments will attract highly commit-
ted salespersons only in the event that senior-level
administration maintains consistency in its vision
regarding sales operations.

Discussion

This study analyzes the operations of a tickets sales
force at a small, private BCS university from 1998-
2008. Using qualitative methods, our findings indicate
a number of obstacles that athletic departments face
regarding the implementation of a ticket sales force.
Though not all athletic departments operate in the
same economic, cultural, and political environments,
the propositions listed above have significant implica-
tions for any athletic department interested in imple-
menting a ticket sales initiative.

Historically, many college athletic departments have
been reluctant to commit resources to an aggressive
outbound ticket sales department focused exclusively
on the selling of season and group tickets. Whereas
professional sport organizations use their ticket sales
departments to promote and sell tickets to their orga-
ization's sport events, the majority of college athletic
departments have been unwilling to adequately fund,
hire, or train salespersons dedicated to the sale of sport
event tickets. With regard to the UM athletic depart-
ment, the challenges facing the implementation and
management of a tickets sales force were extensive. For
instance, garnering a fostered commitment from sen-
ior-level personnel to provide managerial and financial
support was a constant obstacle. Our results indicate
that many employees involved in sales operations felt
that the department was more concerned with ticket
sales than they were with other sources of revenue gen-
eration, including donations and student fees. Because
of unique revenue streams, initiatives in college athletic
departments to increase revenue through aggressive
outbound ticket sales departments have generally been
overlooked.

Our results indicate that frequent turnover at the sen-
ior levels of the UM athletic department resulted in a
fluctuation of priorities that adversely affected the
chances of success for the sales force. Data showed that
committed efforts to increasing ticket sales were directly
related to the priorities set forth by current athletic
department administrators. As such, the initiatives
implemented within the UM athletic department were
short lived due to the frequent turnover of athletic
directors during the time of the study. Therefore, one of
our propositions states that turnover among upper-level
administration will provide salespersons an umbrella of
inconsistency under which to work due to changes in
priorities brought about by each new manager.

Due to the limited experience most senior-level
administrators had relative to ticket sales, proper guid-
ance and training for UM ticket salespersons was ulti-
mately hindered. In addition, there was a continuous
reluctance on the part of senior-level administrators to
create and properly finance sales initiatives. Because
senior-level administrators had limited ticket sales
experience, there was also notable hesitation on their
part to hire or promote ticket sales staff to higher-level
positions. During the time, the trend at UM was to
hire administrators for senior-level positions whose
experience came from donations or fundraising back-
grounds. Because of this, many prospective college ath-
etic administrators rightfully look at the former
positions as key to advancement up the athletic department ladder.

The UM athletic directors and sales personnel did not function in a formal, structured environment. Though observational data showed that UM did in fact create strategies to open channels of communication inside and outside the hierarchical structure, participants interviewed indicated that these channels did not always exist. Further, salespersons interviewed claimed that existing channels did not always function as efficiently as the UM athletic directors implied. Results revealed that different ticket salespersons reported directly to different athletic directors and administrators, which caused a great deal of confusion throughout the entire organization regarding the appropriate lines of communication.

Our findings show that recruiting sales force personnel at UM was challenged due to the unwillingness of the athletic department to maintain competitive sales commissions relative to those in professional sports. Participants claimed that the frequent turnover at the management level of the department did not allow for a consistent sales philosophy, which ultimately led to changes in the amount of sales commissions the department was willing to pay ticket salespersons. Further, data show that many of the challenges that faced UM also resulted from the department’s unwillingness to pay competitive base salaries to non-senior level administrators. In the professional industry, sales managers and salespersons are often motivated by salary based reward systems (Kraft, 1999). In fact, sales personnel in the professional sports industry are often the highest paid employees in an organization. Athletic departments seeking to build and maintain a committed sales force might do well to consider similar compensation strategies.

Though not necessarily an obstacle, our findings did reveal that moves of UM athletic programs to newer or larger athletic venues created a motivation for athletic department personnel to make funding and services more readily available for tickets sales departments. In addition, greater commitment to ticket sales departments were realized during this time as sales force personnel were motivated by the department’s focus on ticket sales for home games at the new facilities. As athletic departments move closer toward a more professional model, it is essential that department administrators understand the conditions and consequences necessary to ensure the successful implementation and management of ticket sales initiatives in college athletics.

**Conclusion**

There is a dearth of research concerning the topic of ticket sales in college athletics. This paper proposes that certain challenges exist that may impede the development and management of sales force operations within a college athletic department. Increasing cost expenditures in areas such as coaching salaries and athletic scholarships have caused athletic departments to seek out alternative sources of revenue generation. One manner in which departments can increase revenue growth is maintaining and actively growing a consistent fan base, a concept professional sports teams have long accepted and embraced. As such, athletic departments need to embrace a sales philosophy similar to that of the professional industry that seeks to maximize their athletic programs’ marketplace value. According to our findings, a first step in this direction would be for athletic departments to make quality investments in a ticket sales force, something most universities have been reluctant to do thus far.

Although ticket sales remain an underdeveloped line of inquiry, recent developments within intercollegiate sports show that this is starting to change. Therefore, it is essential that academic inquiry also increase its investigation into areas applicable to industry concerns. While this paper examines the case of one athletic department, we believe the propositions noted herein provide managerial implications for other universities investing in similar ticket sales initiatives.

The propositions noted in this study seek to serve as a starting point for future research in this field. For example, since many Division I athletic programs have integrated themselves as self-funded entities apart from the institution, further study could possibly explore the legality of their ability to pay commissions and bonuses to sales force personnel. Additional inquiry might also examine the differences in public and private institutions’ attitudes regarding the use of a ticket sales force. The reality that the athletic department studied in this research operates within a small private university system in a large metropolitan city played an important role in the decision to utilize a ticket sales force, thus the results of the study might not generalize to other state funded universities. Researchers might do well to consider the propositions provided here as a map for future areas of study for other specific cases.

Our findings suggest that the obstacles standing in the way of communication between athletic department directors and sales force personnel will hamper the effectiveness and efficiency of sales force personnel. This research also suggests that a greater commitment to ticket sales force strategies will be fostered during a time of sport venue relocation and new stadium con-
struction. However, we hypothesize that provisions restricting most universities from paying competitive base salaries and sales commissions relative to those in the professional sports industry will limit the number of qualified sales position applicants. Finally, it is further proposed that maintaining a committed and qualified sales staff will be moderated by changes in sales compensation and incentives resulting from changes in business practices within a collegiate athletic department. In sum, as athletic departments move closer toward a more professional model, it is essential that department administrators understand the conditions and consequences necessary to ensure the successful implementation and management of ticket sales initiatives in college athletics.

References


