

USING INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS TO BUILD AND LEVERAGE A UNIVERSITY'S BRAND: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

It could be argued that NCAA Division IA intercollegiate athletic programs are the primary reason why a majority of institutions of higher learning in the United States have strong brand awareness. The popularity of the so-called “revenue-generating” sports of football, men’s and women’s basketball, and (to a lesser degree) hockey at major institutions create millions of gross brand impressions across multiple media types. Anecdotally, when a university’s intercollegiate athletic team succeeds, donations increase to the institution (e.g., Rhoads & Gerking, 2000); a greater number and higher caliber of prospective students apply to the institution (Talalay, 2007); and, campus pride swells (Dirocco, 2007). Large institutions in preeminent conferences receive a disproportionate amount of this media coverage and revenue; however, there are several academic institutions in the US whose athletic programs compete at the top level of intercollegiate athletics that struggle to compete against the more affluent competition. While some may accuse the collective efforts of these often-times smaller schools and conferences of engaging in a type of athletic “arms race” by wasting resources necessary to field an athletic program at the Division I-A level, surely, the decision by these smaller institutions is not an exercise in folly and must have some benefit to the institution as a whole. The current research examines this question by deconstructing one small institution’s (Robert Morris University) strategic use of intercollegiate athletics as part of a larger branding scheme.

A body of research exists dealing with the role of American intercollegiate athletics in general (e.g., Beyer & Hannah, 2000; Goff, 2000; Wolfe, 2000); creating a sustainable advantage in an intercollegiate athletics program (Smart & Wolfe, 2000); and the identification of a university community to an intercollegiate athletics program (Judson & Carpenter, 2005). Researchers have also addressed the issue of branding (and the challenges of undertaking successful branding) in a higher educational setting (e.g., Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006; Chepelo, 2007; 2006; Jevons, 2006; Keller, 2004) and its benefits (e.g., Belanger, Mount, & Wilson, 2002). Surprisingly, a dearth of research exists discussing the strategic use of a university’s intercollegiate athletic program to further the overall branding objectives of the institution.

Robert Morris University (RMU) is located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, and is home to approximately 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students (although only about 1,000 students live on campus). Since the school’s inception in 1921, it has transformed itself from a proprietary business school to a junior college, college and, in 2001, a university. At each phase of the institution’s growth, accompanying structural changes were made to the curriculum, staff and facilities. As RMU evolved to a more traditional college campus, intercollegiate athletic programs were introduced and used primarily as a means to drive enrollment. Today, RMU sponsors 23 Division I men’s and women’s sport combined, competing primarily in the Northeast Conference. In the past decade, the department has seen its share of success, with the football team claiming the DI-AA non-scholarship national championship; the women’s volleyball squad earning a berth to the NCAA Tournament three times; men’s soccer earning an NCAA tournament berth once; the women’s basketball squad winning the conference tournament and an NCAA tournament bid, and several other squads winning their conference titles. Most recently, the men’s hockey squad defeated then number one-ranked Notre Dame – a victory reporters dubbed “the biggest win in the program’s history.” Any and all success garnered by these teams was viewed as an ancillary benefit by university

administration, since RMU is one of three Division I athletic programs in the market and media coverage of any type is rare.

Today, under new university leadership, a concerted effort is underway to designate and feature one intercollegiate athletic program to aid the university in creating a national reputation. The question facing the current administration – and the one examined in this case study – is which team to select.

METHODS

To understand the strategic implications and effectiveness of using one of the institution's intercollegiate athletic programs to aid in the overall branding of the institution, the researchers examined past, present and proposed university objectives and tactics impacting (or potentially impacting) the university's brand based on the institution's strategic planning documents. These strategies were then analyzed against specific tactics implemented by the intercollegiate athletic department and the university's overall marketing efforts, allowing the researchers to identify gaps between strategic branding objectives and tactical outcomes. By using the current strategic plan (approved by the University Board of Governors in March 2007), an examination of prospective tactics impacting the new branding objectives can be conducted.

RESULTS

Robert Morris University's strategic plan involves five initiatives. Initiative 4 focuses on branding, and efforts to strengthen the RMU brand. One of the strategies proposed under this initiative suggests investing in "upgrading one or more RMU NCAA athletic programs whose success will bring additional publicity, funds and students to RMU." The likely candidates to fill this charge would be football (which competes at the DI-AA level); men's or women's basketball, where earning an NCAA tournament bid and winning one or more games would generate a disproportionately large amount of positive publicity; men's ice hockey (a newer program that has the most potential to realistically compete at a national level); and men's soccer.

DISCUSSION

Should the RMU administration successfully implement its athletic-based branding strategy, the immediate impact would be felt in the five-county area surrounding the campus. As mentioned earlier, the RMU athletic program finds itself relegated to back-page coverage (if any) behind the professional sport teams and other Division I athletic programs in the market. This latter point makes the designation of which sport to feature crucial for the administration. It may be wise to feature a sport, such as hockey, that does not have any direct competition in the market at the collegiate level. With additional resources, the men's hockey program could recruit the student-athletes necessary to compete on a national stage rather quickly, exposing the RMU brand to not just a regional, but national audience as well. This presentation will explore all the issues surrounding this decision, including the history of the school and its athletic program, past and current branding efforts, and other pertinent information that should be considered by the decision-makers. Finally, the presentation will propose specific branding activities that the university and intercollegiate athletic department should undertake to help achieve the desired brand position.

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