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A Qualitative Exploration of Ticket-Pricing Decisions in Intercollegiate Athletics

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Ticket sales represent a significant revenue stream for NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision athletic departments, yet little is known about how administrators determine prices for those tickets. Utilizing strategic planning as the primary framework and supplemented by stakeholder theory, this study examines ticket-pricing decisions from the viewpoint of athletic administrators with various departmental responsibilities to better understand the role of ticket pricing in intercollegiate sport. Twenty athletic administrators, representing two Power 5 and two Group of 5 institutions, were interviewed about their experiences with ticket pricing. In addition to common pricing objectives related to revenue, patronage, and operations, administrators also suggested attendance-oriented pricing objectives unique to college sport pricing theory. However, findings suggest no well-defined organizational objective for ticket pricing exists within the departments sampled. The factors athletic administrators consider when contemplating pricing decisions can be categorized into seven areas: (a) scheduling, (b) research, (c) team performance, (d) stakeholders, (e) discrimination, (f) fan experience, and (g) competitive comparisons.

Keywords: pricing, decision-making, strategic management, revenue generation

The business of intercollegiate athletics is a complex enterprise. Athletic administrators serve in arguably the most visible arm of the institution (Putler & Wolfe, 1999), but economic hardships have reduced governmental support for many state institutions (Mitchel et al., 2016), resulting in calls for athletic departments to become more self-sufficient by reducing or eliminating university subsidies for intercollegiate athletics (Ridpath et al., 2015). However, such self-sufficiency has proven difficult for even traditionally self-sustaining athletic departments since March 2020 (e.g., Johnson, 2021; Miller, 2021), as the COVID-19 pandemic has left many National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institutions with budget deficits, thus creating additional pressure to maximize revenue opportunities as fans are allowed back into college venues. Consequently, the ability to secure external revenue sources (e.g., ticket sales, donations, game guarantees) is now an essential expectation of many athletic administrators.

Because few universities achieve capacity crowds for even the primary spectator “revenue-generating” sports of football (Smith, 2015a) and men’s basketball (Smith, 2015b), ticket sales are one area of revenue generation with potential for growth. However, a more thorough understanding of the college ticketing phenomenon is necessary, especially as Hoffer and Pincin (2016) have found additional revenues generated via ticket sales can reduce athletic subsidies. Despite examinations of sales strategies (Bouchet et al., 2011), one of the core components of ticket revenue—pricing—has largely been ignored. Pricing is key to sales because it functions as a means of cost recovery, represents value, and can influence behavior (Shank, 2009). Although research on the secondary market (e.g., StubHub) indicates pricing inefficiencies in college football (Sanford & Scott, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2021), little is known about primary market pricing decisions among intercollegiate athletic decision makers. Further complicating this issue is the disparity across FBS institutions, including institutional-level machinations, league affiliation, profit-seeking behavior, stadium capacity, sports ticketed, sales force management, and strategic differences related to the bundling of ticket sales and donations, to name a few.

Professional sport organizations generally have a primary focus on developing pricing strategies, which directly or indirectly maximize revenue. However, as suggested by Morehead et al. (2017), we should be careful not to assume intercollegiate athletic programs similarly prioritize revenue generation, due in part to their non-profit status, season-ticket purchase processes, disparate seating capacities, complex organizational structures, and unique institutional cultures, to name a few. Therefore, athletic departments may have unique factors driving prices across individual programs, conferences, and divisions, and the complex nature of the college sport environment may play a role in discrepancies regarding primary motives undergirding pricing strategy. This unique environment warrants further attention on the managerial aspects of the pricing process in college athletics.

Using data to drive strategic decision-making in intercollegiate athletics has evolved and increased over the years (Hoffman et al., 2009), and investigations into the managerial decision-making process as it relates to pricing is important in this landscape. To that end, a better understanding of pricing practices will benefit the field in two ways. First, ticket sales account for a significant portion of athletic department revenue generation (Fulks, 2015). Second, the price of a ticket can be considered a gatekeeping mechanism due to its influence on ancillary revenue streams such as concessions and parking (Fort, 2004; Krautmann & Berri, 2007).

Despite these benefits, the paucity of ticketing processes or policy development in college athletics necessitates an exploratory approach to managerial influences on pricing policy. By understanding how athletic departments structure their revenue generation opportunities, the strategic planning process offers insight into how they achieve organizational goals.

Strategic planning provides direction and is the point of departure from which all administrative initiatives and decisions (e.g., ticket pricing strategies) should originate. Furthermore, because strategic planning requires involvement from internal organizational units and concern for the external environment (Chelladurai, 2009), stakeholder theory is used to interpret findings from this research. Stakeholder theory has been utilized to study various groups with vested interests in college athletics (Putler & Wolfe, 1999), and is “a framework for understanding managerial decision-making by taking into account the interest of stakeholders” (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011, p. 204). This study uses a sample of Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) administrators to answer two research questions regarding ticket-pricing in intercollegiate athletics:

RQ 1: What is the primary ticket-pricing objective for “revenue” sports? ?

RQ 2: What factors are important to administrators in making ticket-pricing decisions ?

This research extends the strategic planning literature related to sport management by examining the primary tenet of goal setting at the operational level, while also extending the understanding of environmental factors which influence ticket-pricing strategy. The findings also extend stakeholder theory as it applies to internal stakeholders involved in decision-making.

Review of Literature

A review of athletic department staff directories provides an indication of the importance of revenue generation to the college sport enterprise, with job titles related to business development, annual giving, donor relations, partnerships, licensing, revenue management, strategic marketing, ticket sales, premium seating, client services, and sponsorship. Despite these job responsibilities, however, research is limited on revenue generation within intercollegiate athletics. Fundraising has long been the topic of college athletic revenue-related research, with a primary focus on donor behavior (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2003; Staurowsky et al., 1996; Wells et al., 2005). There is an important connection between donor behavior and ticket prices in college athletics due to ticket-oriented benefits tied to annual donations for many programs (Wolverton & Kambhampati, 2016). Gladden et al. (2005) and Mahoney et al. (2003) found ticket-oriented benefits to be a primary motivation for athletic donations. Tickets and donations have a unique relationship in college sport and therefore strategic initiatives in these areas must consider the broader scope of the athletic department.

In an investigation on profitability within Division I athletic programs, Matheson et al. (2012) found departments relied on both direct and indirect subsidizations, as well as donations, and only the top echelon of schools were profitable. To better understand the factors influencing revenue for FBS athletic departments, McEvoy et al. (2013) found conference affiliation, football and men’s basketball success, and enrollment were strong predictors of generated revenue. Subsequent research has been conducted to better understand issues related to individual revenue sources, such as sponsorship (Jensen et al., 2016), crowdfunding (Sattler et

al., 2019), and fundraising strategy (Lipsev et al., 2021). However, research related to ticket pricing in college athletics is scarce.

Sport ticket pricing has evolved from fixed pricing, as is common with season ticket packages, into a more sophisticated venture (Rascher & Schwarz, 2010). Many athletic departments now use variable ticket pricing (VTP), which charges different prices for tickets based on perceived demand such as the quality of an opponent, the day of the week, or holidays (Rascher et al., 2007). Whereas fixed and variable strategies are limited because they set prices in advance of a season (Rascher & Schwarz, 2010), dynamic ticket pricing (DTP) adjusts prices in real time based on demand (Drayer, Shapiro, & Lee, 2012); however, this strategy is rarely used in college sport (Smith, 2015a).

Although ticketing research has helped explain such strategies, (Drayer & Shapiro, 2011; Drayer, Rascher, & McEvoy, 2012), relatively little has been done to explain pricing from a managerial perspective, with existing pricing literature largely focused on professional leagues (e.g., National Football League, English Premier League), rather than collegiate sports (Clowes & Clements, 2003; Reese & Mittelstaedt, 2001; Rische & Mondello, 2003, 2004).

Within the domain of collegiate athletics, ticket price has been used as an attendance predictor variable (e.g., Price & Sen, 2003), and on the administrative side, communication is key to establishing satisfying relationships with students regarding departmental ticketing policy (Greenwell, 2007). Concerning ticket sales operations, Bouchet et al. (2011) put forth a set of propositions for successful sales management in college sport. Subsequently, Popp and colleagues found proactive outbound sales initiatives lead to over \$1 million in both ticket revenue and donations in the first three years (Popp et al., 2019), and internally managed sales force teams outperformed outsourced firms for ticket sales (Popp et al., 2020). However, these investigations focused on ticket sales, not pricing decisions.

Research in the secondary ticket market has provided evidence of primary ticket pricing inefficiency. Sanford and Scott (2014) found when comparing departmental season ticket prices to a mock season ticket derived from secondary market data for the 2007 football season, only three Southeastern Conference schools had packages priced at market value, suggesting a gap between the asking price of a ticket and what a consumer is actually willing to pay to attend an event. Then, in a study of individual 2019 Power Five football games, Shapiro et al. (2021) found “get in” prices for tickets purchased on StubHub were less than the mean ticket price sold by athletics departments on the primary market. These inefficiencies may stem from a lack of understanding regarding ticketing policy objectives, the factors considered when contemplating such policies, the individuals involved in decision making, or the strategies implemented to achieve departmental goals.

Much of the research related to ticket prices in college athletics has involved studies on post-season secondary market pricing (Popp et al., 2018; Rische, 2014; Rische et al., 2014, 2015, 2016). However, as pointed out by Morehead et al. (2017), either the league or NCAA sets postseason tournament prices, which excludes individual schools from the pricing process from the outset and does little to further our understanding of primary market pricing decisions. In limited research related to institutional-level pricing decisions, Mayer et al. (2017) investigated factors related to luxury suite prices in college football, while Stensland and Bass (2017) investigated whether attendees are charged entry fees for non-revenue intercollegiate sports. Given the number of schools who charge admission for athletic events, and the millions generated from ticket sales annually, further research on managerial-level pricing decisions within college athletics is warranted (Morehead et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Reliance on a single theory may not be sufficient to understand complicated phenomena such as ticket pricing (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Myriad pressures and influences affect organizational processes; thus, this exploratory research draws on strategic planning and stakeholder theory to navigate the complexities of pricing decisions in college athletics.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning concepts have expanded from business into the public and nonprofit sectors (Bryson, 2004), and are now espoused in sport management curricula (Chelladurai, 2009). Wolf & Floyd (2017) define strategic planning as “a more or less formalized, periodic process that provides a structured approach to strategy formulation, implementation, and control” (p. 1758), and the basic tenets describe a process-based approach to mission development, environmental scanning, goal formulation, action planning, and assessment. Kriemadis (1997), Yow et al. (2000), and Earle (2009) each provide macro models for department-wide strategic planning processes in college athletics, but no known studies have investigated the meso-level process of planning in the subunit of ticketing. Sutton and Migliore (1988) label these as operational plans developed by functional units within the department. Such research is warranted considering the importance of ticket sales as a source of generated revenue for athletic departments across the country (Fulks, 2015).

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholders are “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Such individuals take myriad forms from financiers to operators, and in the realm of intercollegiate athletics, important stakeholder groups include student-athletes, prospective and current students, alumni, faculty, and community members (Putler & Wolfe, 1999). Within this domain, stakeholder segmentation is crucial for athletic administrators because it is more efficient than attempting to identify and assess a potentially paralyzing number of individuals. For intercollegiate athletics, one particularly useful means of segmentation is to classify them as either internal (i.e., supply-side) stakeholders who price and sell tickets, or external (i.e., demand-side) stakeholders who purchase tickets and attend games.

Administrators must understand stakeholder groups carry their own values, influencing the way in which they frame and interpret issues (Jones & Wicks, 1999). Administrators must also recognize long-term organizational success is dependent upon the ability to satisfy the disparate needs of divergent stakeholder groups (Friedman et al., 2004). This is particularly important for collegiate ticket pricing, as decision makers must respond to the needs of supply-side stakeholders tasked with managing the department, as well as to consumers who have the power to determine whether to invest in the department.

For example, consumers may feel “priced out” based on increased prices or decide to take advantage of the plethora of mediated channels available to watch a game rather than attend in-person. If this results in decreased attendance, there are a number of implications beyond potential losses in revenue, which include a potential loss of ancillary revenue and sponsorship value (Drayer, Shapiro, & Lee, 2012; Shapiro & Drayer, 2012), a loss of revenue through

donations tied to ticket purchases (Gladden et al., 2005), and a loss of in-game atmosphere created by large crowds, including students (Simmons et al., 2017). The balance of revenue maximization and attendance at revenue generating college sporting events is critical to college sport administrators, thus the importance of understanding various stakeholder groups.

Among those who have investigated the intersection of stakeholder theory and ticketing within intercollegiate athletics, Covell (2004, 2005) studied the effects season-ticket holders can have on athletic policy, and Stensland and Bass (2017) explored ticketing policies for non-revenue sports. However, more research is needed to better understand the supply-side of this dynamic. In short, thorough stakeholder analysis can be utilized by sport managers to develop a comprehensive strategic plan that will ultimately lead to a more efficient allocation of resources and enhance organizational viability (Friedman et al., 2004).

Method

This study uses a phenomenological approach to discover, describe, and more deeply understand the unique lived experiences of individuals and their multiple realities (Hays & Singh, 2012). Interviews with decision-makers uncover commonalities among their individual experiences to explain collegiate athletic ticket-pricing decisions.

Participants

Considering limitations from previous sport ticket pricing studies relying solely on a sample of ticket managers (Reese & Mittelstaedt, 2001), and the call for diverse pricing committees from the business literature (Indounas, 2006), a stratified purposeful sample of participants was sought by soliciting data from several subunits within college athletic administration. Once a willing top-level athletic administrator was recruited via the researchers' personal industry contacts, a snowball sampling method was then instituted to recruit participants from within the same department who are involved in ticketing. Such administrators included athletic directors, external operations administrators, business/finance officers, marketers, ticket office managers, and development directors.

A total of 20 athletic administrators from four different athletic departments (two Power 5 and two Group of 5 schools) participated in this study, with each department practicing a version of VTP as a primary ticket-pricing strategy. Given our desire to elicit data from a diverse group of administrators, a larger sample of participants was needed to adequately represent the multi-faceted phenomenon of ticket price decision-making beyond typical adherences to sampling for phenomenology or saturation (Hays & Singh, 2012). Table 1 presents a pseudonym and description of each participant, including their administrative role within their organization.

To form a more transferable sample and capture potential variances between departments with diverse resources, criterion sampling was utilized to secure representation from two subcategories of FBS athletic programs—Power 5 (P5) schools (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference) and Group of 5 (G5) schools (i.e., American Athletic Conference, Conference USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, and Sun Belt Conference). Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the four athletic departments included in this study.

Table 1
Participant Descriptions

Pseudonym	Institution	FBS Category	Title	Subunit	Experience	Objective(s)
Alvin	A	Group of 5	Athletic Director	General Oversight	13 years	P
Antonio	B	Group of 5	Athletic Director	General Oversight	30 years	O
Beth	C	Power 5	Associate AD	Business	6 years	O, R
Bill	A	Group of 5	Associate AD	Business	15 years	P
Bob	B	Group of 5	Senior Assoc. AD	Business	32 years	P, R
Brooke	D	Power 5	Senior Assoc. AD	Business	12 years	O, R
Dave	A	Group of 5	Associate AD	Development	23 years	P, R
Dianne	B	Group of 5	Senior Assoc. AD	Development	4 years	P, R
Dominick	C	Power 5	Associate AD	Development	18 years	A, O, P, R
Duane	D	Power 5	Senior Assoc. AD	Development	20 years	O, R
Eleanor	D	Power 5	Executive Assoc. AD	External Operations	18 years	R
Emily	B	Group of 5	Senior Assoc. AD	External Operations	39 years	P, R
Evan	C	Power 5	Deputy AD	External Operations	24 years	P, R
Mario	D	Power 5	Director	Marketing	4 years	A, O, R
Mason	B	Group of 5	Associate AD	Marketing & Ticketing	10 years	P, R
Michael	A	Group of 5	Associate AD	Marketing & Ticketing	10 years	A, P
Monte	C	Power 5	Senior Assoc. AD	Marketing	5 years	A, O, R
Thomas	B	Group of 5	Assistant AD	Ticketing	4 years	P, R
Timothy	C	Power 5	Assistant AD	Ticketing	10 years	P, R
Travis	D	Power 5	Associate AD	Ticketing	35 years	O, P

Note. A = Attendance-oriented objectives; O = Operations-oriented objectives; P = Patronage-oriented objectives; R = Revenue-oriented objectives

Table 2
Institutional Information

Institution	FBS Category	Region	Control	Approximate Enrollment	Carnegie Classification	Sales Force Management	Athletic Ranking
A	Group of 5	South	Public	20,000	Doctoral/Professional	Outsourced	Q2
B	Group of 5	South	Public	24,000	Doctoral: High Research	Outsourced	Q2
C	Power 5	South	Public	23,000	Doctoral: Very High Research	In-House	Q1
D	Power 5	South	Public	31,000	Doctoral: Very High Research	In-House	Q1

Note. Regions are based on geographical designations from the US Census Bureau. Classification of each institution is based on the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education. Athletic ranking is a proxy for athletic program success, which is operationalized as the institution's mean finish in the Learfield Director's Cup from 2007-08 through 2016-2017 and listed in quartiles to protect anonymity.

Data Collection & Procedure

This study employs a three-part interview protocol. Participants were first asked to describe their department's primary objective for ticket pricing to provide a frame of reference for the ensuing discussion. The interviewer then provided each participant with a worksheet and verbal instructions to engage in a thought-listing exercise (Cacioppo et al., 1997), which gave individuals three minutes to hand-record their thoughts, feelings, and ideas on the factors they believed should be considered when determining pricing decisions for intercollegiate sporting events. Finally, consistent with phenomenological inquiry, a semi-structured interview (see Appendix) allowed participants to describe the phenomenon of ticket pricing in their own words.

The protocol was reviewed for face validity by two FBS athletic administrators specializing in development and ticketing, respectively, as well as two independent sport management researchers with expertise in qualitative methodology who were not members of the research team. To further validate the design, a pilot test was conducted with a veteran intercollegiate athletics marketing administrator to ensure coherence of the protocol. With the exception of one interview conducted via phone due to scheduling conflicts, all interviews were face-to-face. Interviews averaged 38 minutes, were audio-recorded for accuracy, and were professionally transcribed. Participant confidentiality was protected by removing identifying information such as venue names, school, city, or conference affiliation. In the transcripts, participants were assigned pseudonyms to further ensure confidentiality while also identifying their subunit responsibility (e.g., names beginning with "M" for marketing administrators, names beginning with "D" for development). Participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts to confirm authentic representation and to ensure data accuracy (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Analysis

Thought-Listing Exercise. Following the thought-listing exercise, two coders independently performed content analyses on the data. Exercises in previous research used a two-round sequence of open and axial coding (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014). Given the thought-listing exercise employed in this study limited participants to short phrases, those distinct "in vivo" ideas represented the open coding component of the analysis. For axial coding, the in vivo codes were condensed into categories based on commonalities using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The two coders then discussed emergent themes until reaching consensus.

Interviews. This study followed Creswell's (2006) method for phenomenological analysis. First, the primary researcher bracketed personal experiences in an attempt to prevent bias. Although never involved in ticketing, the researcher has held various roles within Division I athletics for more than a decade. Thus, the researcher's knowledge and experience within college athletics qualifies as an insider researcher. This approach helps to establish a closer epistemological connection between the researcher and participants, thus allowing for the elicitation of more meaningful information and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The primary and secondary coders then engaged in horizontalization of the transcripts to identify non-repetitive statements. These statements were then grouped into broad themes using

constant comparison. Themes were synthesized to write thick description of the experiences by including verbatim examples from the transcripts. Finally, the researchers reflected on the context of the experience to identify potential meanings and variations among such meanings (Creswell, 2006; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Strategies for Trustworthiness

In this study, credibility was demonstrated through member checking. Transferability was demonstrated through a triangulation of data sources by utilizing a group of athletic administrators diverse in both conference-level autonomy (P5 or G5) and departmental responsibility. Dependability was demonstrated through the triangulation of multiple coders and the use of NVivo content analysis software to ensure robust organization of data analysis. Confirmability was demonstrated through bracketing, thick description, unobtrusive triangulation of publicly available artifacts, and the use of an independent coder who was blinded from

Results and Discussion

Two research questions were posed for this exploratory study to help us further understand ticket-pricing decisions for intercollegiate athletics. RQ1 focused on ticket-pricing objectives, and although adherence to a well-defined organizational objective was not found, each administrator interviewed did suggest more-or-less informal objectives oriented toward revenues, patronage, operations, or attendance and at times coalesced into general patterns. Regarding RQ2, seven factors were found to influence pricing decisions—scheduling, research, team performance, stakeholders, discrimination, fan experience, and competitive comparisons.

Ticket Pricing Objectives

All but four administrators surveyed identified multiple objectives when it came to setting ticket prices. This multi-faceted approach is not necessarily surprising, as “the complexity of pricing decisions imposes the need to pursue more than one objective at a time” (Avlonitis & Indounas, 2005, p. 48). What is concerning, however, was the lack of congruence between administrators when describing their respective departments’ objectives. Instead, administrators described disparate responses that largely align with the pricing objectives posited by Lovelock (1996): revenue-oriented, patronage-oriented, and operations-oriented objectives. In addition, our findings suggest a fourth objective—attendance—is also an important distinction in intercollegiate athletics pricing. These four objectives—revenue, patronage, operations, and attendance—are described in more detail below and are also presented in Table 3, followed by a discussion of the apparent lack of collaboration between administrators on departmental objective-setting.

Revenue-Oriented Objectives. The revenue orientation toward pricing is an overarching desire to grow revenue via ticket sales and other ancillary revenue streams. Intercollegiate athletic departments have shown signs of profit-maximizing behavior (Fort & Quirk, 1999), where tickets are priced in the inelastic portion of the demand curve to ensure demand does not waiver due to pricing changes (Fort, 2004). It is suggested prices are only altered in ways that will have negligible effects on demand in an effort to protect ancillary

revenue streams such as concessions and parking (Fort, 2004; Krautman & Berri, 2007). Table 3 presents illustrative quotes from administrators focused on revenue generation. Administrators describe a balance between charging enough to improve the experience and being cautious towards reducing donations by raising ticket prices. Administrators also note ticket pricing can be a strategic move towards capturing additional ancillary revenue such as parking, merchandise, and concessions, making ticket pricing only one component of the entire fan revenue picture.

In addition to ticket sales, these findings suggest donations are also an ancillary revenue stream that may be protected through inelastic ticket pricing. Although some may argue donations and ticket sales revenues are inextricably linked and it is therefore unnecessary to differentiate between the two, it is important to recognize the allocation of these financial resources are subject to different administrative restrictions (i.e., foundation-based accounts vs. athletics general fund accounts). Therefore, the source of such revenues is an important distinction, as it may dictate how those financial resources are distributed. In all, this revenue-oriented objective received the most attention among the administrators surveyed (15/20), with each administrator from *Institution C* highlighting it as an important objective when determining ticket prices. However, although expressing goals similar in orientation, the administrators did not articulate a formal department-level objective.

Patronage-Oriented Objectives. A patronage-orientation toward pricing shows concern for market affordability, fairness, and the opportunity to attend events. Within the domain of professional sport, Clowes and Clements (2003, p. 107) suggest “some clubs attempt to maximize patronage and adopt patronage-oriented objectives as a means of maximizing appeal amongst certain segments of their support.” Respondents within this sample express similar sentiments, as shown in Table 3. The overarching theme related to a patronage orientation is a sensitivity to what a ticket holder can comfortably spend, rather than attempting to pinpoint the maximum they will pay. This distinction is particularly important because it suggests a distinct departure from the revenue focus in professional sport pricing. More specifically, in the realm of college sport, athletic departments may not feel the pressure to maximize revenue since they are often financially subsidized through the state legislature, student fees, league disbursements, etc., and can function under the institution’s umbrella educational mission.

Study respondents Dave, Mason, and Dominick all describe an approach to pricing that ensures tickets are available at affordable prices. Additionally, Alvin approaches the patronage objective from a value standpoint, insisting tickets be priced at a rate representing a good value to attendees. This category reflected the second-highest objective orientation with 13 administrators suggesting at least one patronage-oriented objective. Although the administrators at *Institution A* all verbalized objectives consistent with a patronage orientation, they all did so from their own unique perspectives instead of sharing what seemed to be a formalized departmental objective. Nevertheless, these patronage-oriented objectives are consistent with stakeholder theory, as they reflect a desire to establish goodwill and satisfy the needs of those with a vested interest in the organization.

Operations-Oriented Objectives. Clowes and Clements (2003) suggest organizations that “lean towards an operations-orientation want to match demand and supply, so as to ensure maximum use of their productive capacity at any given time” (p. 107). This describes a desire to find the “just right” price for the department by locating the “sweet spot” where all tickets are sold at the highest possible price. Such an objective is distinct from a revenue-orientation

because no discussion of ancillary revenue streams exists. Respondents such as Mario and Antonio focus on striking a balance between generating revenue and filling seats. Their comments in Table 3 underscore this importance of balance, along with Brooke, who also talks about a combination of factors that make the overall system work effectively.

Eight administrators described objectives fitting this category, although only one G5 administrator (Antonio) was included. This operations-oriented objective represents the pursuit of balance between the multiple, and sometimes disparate, objectives offered by administrators and helps explain both the complexity of decision-making, and more specifically the complexity of pricing decisions. Therefore, a DTP strategy might be a viable option for departments with requisite resources who seek the “sweet spot” between capacity fulfillment and revenue maximization, as it allows management to adjust prices up or down to more accurately capitalize on real-time demand. However, very few FBS athletic departments (and none in this sample) have implemented such a strategy to achieve these efficiencies, which suggests true operations-oriented objectives in college athletics are scarce.

Attendance-Oriented Objectives. Although administrators who focus on attendance maximization could be considered to follow either operations-oriented or patronage-oriented objectives, our findings suggest it is important to draw clear distinctions, especially given the unique nature of intercollegiate athletics compared to professional sport. More specifically, an attendance-focused orientation is concerned with maximizing ticket distribution to increase attendance and ultimately pack the athletic venue, regardless of revenue generation. This aligns with Popp et al. (2019) in their concern that attendance and ticket revenue are distinct metrics. Attendance-oriented objectives are important for departments because attendance sends positive messages to recruits, generates media attention, increases school spirit, and enhances the institutional image (Yow et al., 2000). Furthermore, college administrators (especially within the G5 conferences) must consider the NCAA’s attendance requirement of 15,000 attendees per game once every two years (Kleps, 2015) when making pricing decisions. Three of the four respondents who mentioned attendance-oriented objectives were involved with marketing. In Table 3, Antonio, Monte, and Mario each describe the role pricing plays in putting butts in seats, even if it means providing deep discounts to do so.

Although it could be argued capacity crowds are fundamentally equivalent to an operations-orientation, it is important to differentiate between the two, as it is not uncommon for tickets to be drastically discounted or even given away to achieve a sell-out or meet attendance requirements, which then results in little-to-no ticket revenue generated for the department. Furthermore, when deep discounting is implemented, such decisions undermine the fairness principle set forth with patronage-oriented objectives, especially among some season-ticket holders who might see their investment as being undercut. When such tactics are implemented, the department risks devaluing its product by emphasizing the short-term solution of selling out the venue rather than the long-term strategic health of the department. Sport researchers have recognized price can be an indicator of quality (Drayer & Shapiro, 2011), and therefore pricing decision-makers must take this possibility under consideration, as positive short-term gains may have negative long-term ramifications.

Table 3

*Ticket Pricing Objectives and Representative Quotes***Revenue-Oriented Objectives:** generating maximum profits or attaining specific revenue targets (Lovelock, 1996)

Respondent	Category	Quote
Dominick	P5	"Obviously in this business, the revenue is very important to be able to continue to grow and fund the things we want to do."
Brooke	P5	"The goal is basically to try and create some additional revenue, so that we can improve the student-athlete experience, or in some facilities, or make sure people are being paid comparatively to other institutions [sic]."
Thomas	G5	"If you out-price your season tickets, at what level does that go to the detriment of your donation base, because now people don't donate as much because they are paying more for the actual ticket?"
Monte	P5	"Once you get somebody into the venue, it's so much bigger than just what they paid for that ticket ... it's all the ancillary things they could buy. It's the fact that they're probably one step closer to becoming a season ticket holder if we give them a good experience."

Patronage-Oriented Objectives: recognizing differing abilities to pay from various market segments (Lovelock, 1996)

Respondent	Category	Quote
Mason	G5	"[I am] a strong believer in a price point for everybody. We don't want to stretch our fans so much that they think we're gouging them ... we want to give everybody that opportunity."
Dave	G5	"When pricing is too high, it cuts your chances of getting that working man who earns \$28,000 a year. If you put tickets at \$32 each for him and his kid, that's what he brings home in a day."
Dominick	P5	"Certain parts of our community, region, [and] state don't have the means."

Operations-Oriented Objectives: ensuring demand matches available supply (Lovelock, 1996)

Respondent	Category	Quote
Antonio	G5	"The primary goal is to get it right. You don't want to leave money on the table and underprice your product. You don't want to lose business and ticket sales—customers—by overpricing."
Mario	P5	"[Our department will] try and find a price that's going to generate the most revenue and fill the most seats."
Brooke	P5	"You need that combination of ticket revenue and people in the seats supporting the team to make it all work well together."

Attendance-Oriented Objectives: maximizing spectator turnout regardless of revenue

Respondent	Category	Quote
Antonio	G5	"We can't make [NCAA attendance requirements] work at [3,000 season tickets], we have to slash [prices]."
Mario	P5	"You've got to price the ticket to fill the venue. Something I've read from Mark Cuban is that if you're going to have a sold-out venue, it's going to create a better atmosphere, fans are going to feel like they're a part of something, there's going to be an increase in demand because you have [fewer] tickets on the market ... sellouts breed sellouts."
Monte	P5	"Ultimately, we're moving tickets, we're getting butts in seats. Are we leaving money on the table? Yes. Sometimes we go deep, deep discount to really move them."

Overlapping Objectives, Questionable Understanding. The disparate responses from administrators regarding each department's primary objective for ticketing suggests a formalized, overarching departmental goal for ticket pricing has not been identified. Of the four departments sampled in this study, only two of the categories for pricing objectives had representation from every administrator from a single school (e.g., patronage-oriented objectives at *Institution A*; revenue-oriented objectives at *Institution C*). The responses from those administrators did not indicate a coherent strategy, but rather haphazard similarities at best. It was clear, not a single set of administrators shared a common, well-articulated departmental objective that would anchor a formal strategic plan for ticket pricing. Although it is certainly possible to pursue multiple objectives simultaneously (e.g., different objectives for different seating sections), those intentions should be formally clarified to ensure a cohesive strategy. Although differences in orientation help justify the need to include various internal stakeholders in pricing decisions, this can present problems in the strategic planning process, as "people get confused and disorganized if they do not know where they are going" (Yow et al., 2000, p. 47) due to a lack of clear objectives consistent with the organizational purpose. Therefore, given the importance of evaluation in strategic planning, a lack of administrative coherence could signal trouble.

Additional Input Factors Influencing Pricing Practices

In addition to the four objectives described above, administrators described input factors that play a role in setting ticket prices. The thought-listing exercise and subsequent discussion yielded seven such factors, including: (a) scheduling, (b) research, (c) team performance, (d) stakeholders, (e) discrimination, (f) fan experience, and (g) competitive comparisons. Table 4 presents these factors and the illustrative quotes from administrators.

Scheduling Factors. Schedule-related factors included the number of contests, the strength of schedule, and the dates of games. Of the respondents, 14 of the 20 administrators alluded to at least one such factor as a determinant of ticket prices. Both subsets of administrators consider P5 opponents to be the most lucrative for their departments, as it allows them to practice VTP by charging higher prices for games with a higher level of demand. These opinions suggest for all programs, games against premium opponents help drive both individual and season ticket sales, indicating higher demand for what the fans perceive to be more desirable foes.

Beyond who was playing, administrators were also cognizant of how often the team was scheduled to play, both in terms of having either too few or too many games in a season. In Table 4, respondents such as Antonio, Travis, and Bob allude to the idea that even dedicated fans get worn out from travel and tailgating, meaning administrators must be cognizant of pricing tickets at a rate that works for the organization over a finite number of engagements. Increasing revenue by increasing the number of games played may not be an option. The suggestion administrators may be willing to forego home game revenue opportunities is evidence not all schools operate with a revenue-maximizing mindset. Therefore, although the effects of opportunity costs such as time and travel on season ticket demand have been investigated in pro sport (e.g., Hakes et al., 2011), this finding suggests similar research is warranted on the college level as well.

Research Factors. This category represents the utilization of archival and research data to assist in the decision-making process and was labeled as one of the most important pricing considerations by nine participants. Much of the basis for pricing was historical, especially related to the previous year's attendance, sales, and price. Administrators from different departments utilized different methods of data collection, including conversations with current ticket holders. One G5 school implemented a static five-year pricing policy after changing conference affiliation. In order to facilitate that move, the department formulated a policy in which football season tickets would increase one dollar per ticket, per game, per year for a period of five years (i.e., assuming a six-game home schedule each season, year one was \$200, year two \$206, year three \$212, etc.). However, as Antonio pointed out, this policy has "no accounting for state of the program, market demand—it's all driven by budget needs." This reflects a cost-based strategy for ticket pricing that should be considered antiquated in spectator sport, especially as research indicates demand-based pricing is more efficient (Drayer, Rascher, & McEvoy, 2012).

Conversely, one P5 school has instituted a formalized "Revenue Projection Team" which conducts five-year forecasting for all athletic revenue streams. The committee meets periodically to make decisions and adjustments on a continuously rolling five-year projection that includes revenues from not only ticketing, but also donations, conference distribution, merchandising, etc. As part of these projections, the committee collaborates to set ticket prices five years out, and then adjusts based on updated data as needed. In 2014, the committee surpassed their football sales revenue projection by \$75,000. Based on 2014 fiscal year comparisons between the school's NCAA financial report and the NCAA Division I Revenues & Expenses Report (Fulks, 2015), the department nearly doubled the FBS median ticket sales revenue.

Such variances between G5 and P5 schools may be an example of how college athletics is dichotomized into "haves" and "have nots," as the differences between the subcategories of FBS institutions reflect resource availability. This is particularly true considering the varying levels of sophistication. At one end, one G5 department leans towards more qualitative (if not anecdotal) data; conversely, one P5 school computes net promoter scores and is building an elaborate database to track lifetime customer value. These vastly different approaches to research may exemplify a widening divide between G5 and P5 institutions.

Team Performance Factors. Eight administrators recognized team performance factors such as the team record and post-season success among the most important considerations when determining ticket prices. Historically, unless an athletic department has implemented a dynamic pricing model, the only way administrators would manipulate price during the season was through discounting, as described by Antonio in Table 4. However, administrators at one P5 school have instituted a quasi-DTP strategy in situations when they have tickets become available near game time. On occasion, the department will offer this limited inventory at a price higher than face value based on indications of higher demand from the secondary ticket market.

Assuming attendance can be used as a proxy for demand, some measure of team success will be included if administrators factor historical sales figures into their decision process. However, as described by Travis in Table 4, not all administrators agree on the importance of team performance as a pricing consideration. Perhaps worth noting here is during the interviews, some administrators seemed to digress into a discussion of ticket *sales* rather than ticket *pricing* when discussing the effects of team performance. Although *sales* and *pricing* are related, administrators in this study were quick to point out price was rarely a factor driving attendance.

Instead, administrators admitted to receiving negative feedback regarding lack of attendance due to factors such as game date, time, opponent, and television, but rarely price.

Stakeholder Factors. Beyond the team performance aspects of pricing, administrators were also aware of the influence external stakeholders have on the process, with seven of them recognizing factors such as socioeconomics as among the most important in reaching pricing decisions. A central tenet of stakeholder theory is valuing the needs and desires of organizational stakeholders, and this pricing input factor directly relates to the overall organizational objective of patronage to the surrounding community and fanbase. The primary considerations for this factor include socioeconomic understanding, geography, transparency in the pricing process, and relationship-building with constituent groups. The administrators describe these factors in greater detail in this subsection of Table 4.

One of the most prominent factors in this category was the need to understand the economics of the local community. In doing so, departments need to develop pricing strategies that will appeal to a broad cross-section of fans, including blue-collar residents of the surrounding communities, students at the university, and donors who are willing to pay a premium for amenities other stakeholder groups may be unable or unwilling to pay for. Within FBS athletic departments, considerable resources are dedicated to cultivating and nurturing relationships with high-level donors. However, departments are also wise to diversify their potential ticket-buying and donor base by engaging stakeholders and building relationships across the spectrum through coordinating strategic programming for youth, students, young alumni, former student-athletes, and the community at large.

Discrimination Factors. Although the stakeholder pricing factors encourage administrators to make sporting events accessible to a variety of constituents, discrimination factors allow them to charge different customers different prices for similar products (Rascher & Schwarz, 2010). Although each administrator surveyed discussed measures of discrimination, six listed different pricing strategies among the most important factors to be considered when determining ticket prices.

In addition to traditional season and single-game tickets, one of the most common points raised by administrators was the formulation of new, creative pricing and/or seating categories within a venue in an attempt to boost attendance, fill a stakeholder need, or more efficiently utilize lagging inventory. Quotes in Table 4 related to discrimination factors focus on administrators attempting to either fill a void in their ticketing menu or repurpose a languishing asset, such as a club level.

Each school also features third-degree price discrimination by offering discounts to those in special populations, such as students, senior citizens, and the military. By using various forms of pricing discrimination, departments are utilizing a differentiated strategy by establishing initiatives targeted to specific subgroups within the school's market. It is important, however, to avoid undercutting season ticket holders by ensuring they represent the price floor. Therefore, as part of any operational plan for ticketing, administrators should consider creative opportunities to grow new revenue and satisfy new populations, so long as those efforts do not undermine long-standing relationships with well-established patrons. Implementing such differentiated strategies also adheres to a primary tenet of stakeholder theory by focusing on the needs of various constituents.

Fan Experience Factors. Although only cited by one administrator as among the most important pricing decision factors, the atmosphere, entertainment, and excitement of the contest were identified by administrators as considerations in pricing decisions. Although these factors are perhaps difficult to quantify, they could act as a means to create a prestige image, which in turn could justify prestige pricing (Avlonitis & Indounas, 2005). Beyond premium pricing for premium services, administrators also suggest experience-related factors such as aesthetics, amenities, activation, and promotions might influence repatronage, acting as a means to help maintain existing customers. These experiences need not be available to all attendees, but rather can be crafted to enhance the experiences of specific segments of the audience. This could help control per-ticket cost, and by extension per-ticket pricing. Therefore, whether an administrator is considering fan engagement among patrons who purchase high-end or general admission tickets, it is important to remember those marketing elements require an expense that should be recouped through pricing.

Competitive Comparison Factors. Finally, every administrator interviewed described comparisons to other entertainment options when talking about the pricing-decision process. Such environmental scanning is crucial to any successful strategic planning process (Yow et al., 2000). In this context, the environmental factors administrators are most concerned with can be broken into two segments—other forms of entertainment and peer institutions. Respondents described substitute sources of entertainment, including professional sport franchises, amusement parks, performing arts centers, and movie theaters as competition for discretionary consumer spending. The other competitive comparison administrators unilaterally agreed to monitoring was pricing at peer institutions—conference foes, regional rivals, and other comparable schools. Table 4 illustrates the types of collegiate and non-collegiate rivals athletic administrators are including in their environmental scanning.

Considering most athletic departments are not competing with other schools in their local marketplace, the influence of their ticket prices warrants further investigation. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), memetic isomorphism can exist when related organizations are faced with ambiguous goals. Given the earlier proposition administrators lack a shared objective for ticket pricing, such ambiguity does appear to exist within college athletics. For those schools that do not price tickets based on comparisons to other forms of entertainment in the local market, future research could investigate this potential for isomorphic pricing behavior.

Conclusions

College athletic ticket pricing is a complex, multi-dimensional process. As athletic departments face pressure to be self-sufficient (Ridpath et al., 2015), a more effective approach to ticket pricing can be a means to generate additional revenue. Previous pricing studies based in professional sport have focused only on ticket managers (e.g., Reese & Mittelstaedt, 2001). This study includes various administrators, all of whom view the phenomenon from different points of departure; however, they were generally concerned with short-term pricing rather than long-term value. Therefore, from a practical standpoint, administrators are encouraged to consider the long view when making pricing decisions.

This study extends the findings from other sport ticket pricing studies and adds a focus on attendance-maximizing objectives. Additionally, relevant considerations such as team performance, stakeholder factors (e.g., public relations, market toleration), and competitive

Table 4

*Ticket Pricing Input Factors and Representative Quotes***Scheduling Factors:** number of contests, strength of schedule, date of game

Respondent	Category	Quote
Duane	P5	“We charged \$50 [to P5 rival fans] and [they] were outraged. ‘How dare you?’ Well, the reality is, we felt ... that they would buy the ticket, and they did ... The [P5] fans say, ‘Well, you are just taking advantage of the game.’ Sure we are, and we ended up selling the ticket.”
Antonio	G5	“Those one or two games a year [against P5 schools] are going to have to drive the other four conference games each year in many ways.”
Evan	P5	“When [marquee P5 conference schools] come here, they are going to buy their entire allotment of visitor’s seats. But when some others come, they don’t and so we have to sell those tickets ... and instead of getting \$75 for a conference game or \$55, we end up getting on average about \$12 for a [FCS] game, for a non-conference ticket.”
Bob	G5	Although the revenue from an extra home game is positive, “if you ask a fan, I’m not sure they want seven home [football] games. They get wore out too, all that tailgating that they do.”
Travis	P5	“People have to travel a pretty good distance ... two, three, four hours to come here. They’re not going to want to do that every weekend.”

Research Factors: archival and research data used in the decision-making process

Respondent	Category	Quote
Bob	G5	“I always tell people with the budget, but especially in tickets, you’ve got to look back to really move forward.”
Dominick	P5	Knowing the price from the previous season “sets the pivot point from which all [pricing] decisions are made.”
Michael	G5	“You’ve got to survey your fans to know what they like, and what they don’t like, and what they want to see changed. You just want to try to fit their needs the best you can, because ultimately that’s what is going to get them to come back and buy a ticket.”
Antonio	G5	“It’s mostly just anecdotal, what we hear from email communication, or what we hear talking to people at the games or in the tailgate area.”
Bob	G5	“Really, it’s just listening to the folks. Some people do surveys every year and things of that nature, which are okay. But, you really do want to listen to your customers.”

Team Performance Factors: team record, post-season success

Respondent	Category	Quote
Brooke	P5	“When I first started going to games, hardly anybody was in the stands and the tickets were pretty cheap. Then as the team became successful and went on to compete [at the national level], suddenly we had a lot more fans, we could increase the prices, people were joining the [booster club] for seating locations.”
Antonio	G5	“If you’re Top 25, playing great, you can probably set your prices a whole lot different than if you’re mediocre or struggling, and I think that’s when you see a lot of single game discounting.”
Beth	P5	“The way we’re forecasting ticket sales right now, it’s based off a team that’s been successful. Their success has grown over the last three years, so it’s easy to project higher rates of ticket sales versus if they weren’t very good.”
Travis	P5	Team quality should not be considered in pricing decisions “because that’s going to vary from year to year and you have to have some type of consistency.”

Stakeholder Factors: demographics, socioeconomics, transparency, relationship-building

Respondent	Category	Quote
Emily	G5	“We try to keep it within the framework of our community, and we’re pretty much a blue-collar market here, so we have to be very cognizant of that.”
Bob	G5	“We’ve got to always be aware of who our crowds are. What kind of income are they making? How old are they?”
Bill	G5	“You need to keep not only [this city] and [this county] in mind, but your surrounding counties, too. You don’t want to price somebody in [a neighboring county] out because they’ve got to drive in.”
Timothy	P5	“We also have to realize that people aren’t able to just catch a cab and come to our games. They’re having to drive for an hour or two ... so there are other expenses besides that ticket.”
Dave	G5	“Sure I want to make more money, but you’ve also got to do the right thing.”
Emily	G5	“Something that continues to be a battle for us, not unlike a lot of other universities, is getting them engaged while they’re here, so that they’ve got an affinity when they graduate.”
Eleanor	G5	“It’s people to people and its relationships ... our community has to feel invested in our football and basketball programs ... And when a community feels invested, and you’re creating a reason for people to care, then they’re more likely to spend their discretionary dollars, and more importantly their discretionary time to go to your event.”

Discrimination Factors: charging different customers different prices for similar products (Rascher & Schwarz, 2010)

Respondent	Category	Quote
Michael	G5	With the addition of end zone tents in their horseshoe football stadium as a single-game premium hospitality option, “It’s an easy \$15,000-20,000 every single game we’ve been able to generate by just fitting a need that we didn’t have before. Those people weren’t buying bleachers, it wasn’t money they were spending anyways, this is new money.”
Dianne	G5	In describing how her school has repurposed the club level of the basketball arena: “Since sales in that area have been declining, this year we have rebranded the whole area, we’ve restructured our pricing, and it’s already been a huge hit.”
Dominick	P5	“We’ve done a lot of different things where we’ve looked at shortening the season ... just a conference package, or just a weekend package, those types of things to try to create a new product, a new piece of inventory that may be more suited to the customer’s usage.”
Mason	G5	Voucher books are “the easiest thing because of the flexibility they provide ... you go to whatever games you want to, you pay a set price, and the tickets are good for the entire season.”
Evan	P5	“We want to be sure that season tickets are, per ticket, a better deal than buying single game tickets.”

Fan Experience Factors: atmosphere, entertainment, excitement, aesthetics, amenities, promotions

Respondent	Category	Quote
Bob	G5	“It’s not just selling the tickets. When they get there, you’ve got to make sure they’re having a good time, too.”
Dominick	P5	Game day here is an amazing thing ... and I think that’s where we’re consistently able to have the freedom to feel like we can get a premium for it, because it is such a unique experience.”
Michael	G5	“There are so many elements that go into the experience ... video board elements, your fireworks, pregame pyros ... do the kids have a good time? ... How many interactive, fun things can you do for folks? And all those things trickle down to buying a ticket.”
Alvin	G5	“In this day and age, you have to offer other things, especially if you want to get a younger demographic in, if you want to get mothers to come in.”
Emily	G5	“If people are going to spend \$30 ... to come watch you, you better entertain them. And I think that’s where some schools really fall flat. They tend to fall back more on their laurels, on their history. And that’s good for the older fans that just write that check every year ... but for the new, younger people, and especially the millennials who have an attention span of a gnat, you’ve got to entertain them. And that has so much to do with not only how you price your tickets, but how you keep people coming back.”

Competitive Comparison Factors: environmental scanning of other forms of entertainment and peer institutions

Respondent	Category	Quote
Alvin	G5	“If you can go to a movie, you can afford a basketball or football game.”
Antonio	G5	“You’re constantly looking for barometers, looking for gauges of not trying to be over-priced, but again not trying to leave anything on the table.”
Beth	P5	“It’s an arms race. You’ve got to keep up with the Alabama’s and Ohio State’s and Oregon’s of the world.”
Evan	P5	“We look at what others in the league are charging. And we do that for competition reasons because if their budgets are increasing and ours aren’t that’s a problem.”

comparison draw parallels between this study and the discriminatory pricing practices highlighted by Clowes and Clements (2003). However, after expanding the parameters of this study to include administrators beyond the ticket office, other influencing factors such as scheduling, fan experience, and research were also brought to light. The degree to which each administrator interviewed possessed decision-making power varied across each institution, with some administrators wielding more pricing decision influence than others. Therefore, this phenomenon of administrative decision-making power warrants further study.

Theoretical Implications

Three findings of interest are highlighted from this study that may impact pricing theory within intercollegiate athletics. First, results indicate donations may be an ancillary revenue stream protected through pricing in the inelastic portion of the demand curve. By structuring season-ticket packages through donations, the athletic foundation receives the revenue, thus potentially providing freedom in how money can be allocated, rather than the constraints that may be placed on revenues flowing through general institutional channels. Second, these findings suggest athletic departments may not feel the pressure to maximize revenue since they are willing to forego revenue opportunities by artificially limiting home athletic events. And finally, intercollegiate athletics has been found to be home to a unique attendance-oriented pricing objective not prominently found in professional sport, where decisions are made to distribute game tickets regardless of revenue generated for the department. Such decisions may in turn undermine season-ticket holder fairness, as well as long-term ticket value and strategic health for the department.

Practical Implications

Among the findings from this study, perhaps the most problematic for college athletic departments is the indication of no formalized objective driving pricing decisions. On one hand, it is plausible to have multiple objectives, especially considering large seating inventories within stadia. However, these objectives should be mutually agreed upon and lead to strategically sound pricing policy designed to achieve that goal. Unfortunately, at present, the administrators representing common athletic departments in this study do not appear to be pulling in the same direction. Aside from one P5 program in this sample, athletic departments seem to lack a systematic, scientific, or analytical approach to pricing decisions. Such a seemingly haphazard approach to ticket pricing could be considered shortsighted in an era when athletic departments are pressured to be more self-sufficient. In all, an unstructured, unscientific approach reduces organizational efficiency and makes meaningful programmatic evaluation nearly impossible without the guidance of clearly articulated and measurable goals and objectives.

Our analysis also suggests institutions truly interested in an operations-oriented approach should consider adopting DTP (if they have the resources to do so) to provide the best opportunity to match supply and demand. There also appears to be disparate levels of sophistication in pricing analysis and strategy development among FBS institutions further widening the divide between G5 and P5. Although the concepts of ticket pricing and ticket sales are certainly linked, it is important for administrators to understand consumer objections as to know whether a purchase barrier is related to price, or some other factor. Furthermore, in an era of the experience economy, athletic administrators must balance the need to entertain the

audience with the need to recoup such marketing expenses through efficient pricing. Finally, as the COVID-19 pandemic ends and venues begin to open up to spectators, athletic administrators need to better understand the role of pricing strategy as a means to achieve departmental objectives and meet the needs of myriad stakeholders.

Limitations and Future Research

Each athletic department operates in its own unique environment and given only four FBS schools from the same U.S. geographic region were sampled, results could be different in other locations. Although our intentions were not to generalize these findings, future research on pricing decisions should include a more diverse typology of institutions. Additionally, the sample may not have included all individuals with pricing influence at each institution, such as coaches or other stakeholders outside the athletic department (e.g., university administration, advisory boards). Furthermore, a cross-sectional approach to data collection limits our ability to understand this pricing process over time. This is especially important considering tax laws took effect in 2018, from which long-term effects on revenue generation are still unknown.

Although this study explored the primary ticket pricing objectives of athletic administrators, only four participants verbalized a single goal. Instead, most provided multiple objectives. Although pricing researchers have justified the pursuit of multiple objectives (Avlonitis & Indounas, 2005), one could argue administrators within the same department should share similar goals if adhering to strategic planning concepts. Duke (1994) admits “pricing issues will never be simple, but the problems involved in pricing dilemmas can be eased with a structured strategy approach” (p. 26). Therefore, future studies could further investigate this strategic component in an attempt to identify the overarching organizational objective(s) for ticket pricing, or whether one is ever even discussed, much less agreed upon. Researchers should also consider the role, function, and purpose of university athletic departments, as this will likely influence the pricing orientation and behavior of individual institutions, which will help further develop theory of college-based ticket pricing as opposed to professional sport. Future investigations might also compare the pricing policies of successful programs (as determined by attendance or ticket revenue) to the pricing policies of less successful departments in an effort to understand best practices in strategic ticketing management. Additionally, research could expand upon the investigation of factors considered by administrators when determining ticket pricing in order to validate the findings of this study. As current and future studies further develop pricing literature from the managerial perspective, it would be worthwhile to revisit demand-based consumer behavior studies to investigate the congruency between consumer demand factors and managerial pricing factors to complement the process identified in this study.

As departments become more dependent on generated revenues, administrators need to be better equipped to make complex pricing decisions that align with their strategic plan or have the wherewithal to seek the assistance of individuals with such expertise via outsourcing or consulting. Administrators must also understand pricing decisions made from seat-to-seat, game-to-game, and season-to-season do not occur in a vacuum, but rather have long-term ramifications regarding lifetime customer value. To find a balance between current financial needs and long-term fiscal health, a collection of administrators should be consulted in an effort to make the most informed pricing decisions possible. The use of a systematic approach to ticket pricing can reap benefits for an athletic program, its athletes, supporters, and parent institution well into the future.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

- 1) Can you briefly describe your department's primary objective when it comes to deciding ticket prices for revenue sports?
- 2) Why do you feel those factors are most important?
- 3) Describe the ticket pricing process used by your athletic department. Walk me through it.
- 4) Thinking back to your department's primary objective with pricing, how effective do you think your department is at achieving their pricing objective?
- 5) Personally, what do you feel should be the most important objective to achieve when pricing tickets?
- 6) What types of different pricing strategies does your department use?
- 7) How effective do you think those pricing strategies are?
- 8) How has your pricing process changed over the years, if at all?
- 9) Overall, what is your general impression about the prices set by your department? (Potential clarifying prompts: Are they too high? Too low? On par? Are the number of pricing segments adequate? Does pricing adequately reflect the value of your events?)
- 10) How do you think your pricing process compares to other athletic departments?
- 11) Tell me about your personal role in the pricing process.
- 12) Do you feel your opinions are adequately valued in the pricing process?
- 13) Was there a question I should have asked, but didn't? Anything else to add?