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# Tomorrow's Fans Gone Today

*Assessing Constraints to Student Attendance  
at College Football Games*

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**Steven Howell**

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess constraints to student attendance at college football games. Surveys were distributed on and around six college campuses (2 "Power 5", 2 "Group of 5", 2 FCS) during a college football game. Using intercept sampling, students not in attendance at the game were asked to rate the extent to which 33 constraints affected their decision not to attend. Results revealed differences in constraints based on conference tier affiliation, frequency of game attendance, and timing of decision not to attend. Implications for practitioners are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Constraints, student attendance, college football, consumer behavior*

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From 2009 to 2013, student attendance at major college football games dropped an average of 7.1% nationwide, including significant double-digit declines at prominent programs such as Florida and Colorado (Cohen, 2014). For college athletics administrators, these numbers are troubling, since current students are often viewed as future season ticket holders and donors. They also aid in creating a better in-game atmosphere and serve an important public relations and marketing role with respect to how the in-venue product is perceived on television. Student attendees also contribute revenue in the form of ticket, concessions, and merchandise sales, and are an actively sought demographic for sponsors (Cohen, 2014; Kaszuba, 2014; Rovell, 2014).

Anecdotal evidence provides insights to explain student nonattendance. With better quality televisions, more televised games, more comfortable seating, and more affordable food and beverages, the at-home experience of consuming live events cannot be replicated by most sport venues. Others point to the financial costs, time commitment, and inconveniences necessary to attend a live sporting event. Noncompetitive games and a stale/repetitive stadium experience are also contributory factors (Cohen, 2014; Kaszuba, 2014; Rovell, 2014). To date, however, limited research has been conducted exploring reasons why students do not attend (Trail, Robinson, & Kim, 2008). This study addresses that gap by examining constraints to student attendance at college football games.

Intercollegiate sport marketers will find this study useful as constraints get to the heart of why patrons do not attend. Further, prior research has suggested constraints inhibit attendance, even for those who are motivated to attend a sporting event (Pritchard, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009). As the challenge to attract students to football games becomes more daunting, efforts to understand what is keeping students away will allow marketers to adjust their strategies to potentially aid students in negotiating the constraints they face.

## **Background**

Perhaps not surprising given the benefits outlined above, prior academic research has focused on factors (i.e., motives and product attributes) driving student attendance at college sporting events (e.g., Ferreira & Armstrong, 2004; Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, & Ellen, 1988; Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003). As Tomlinson, Buttle, and Moores (1995) found, however, the reasons fans attend sporting events are different than factors influencing decisions not to attend. Such factors are referred to as constraints, or impediments/inhibitors of sport-related consumption (Kim & Trail, 2010). Readers are directed to the work of Crawford and Godbey (1987); Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991); and Trail and Kim (2011) for more detailed conceptualizations of leisure constraints, as well as models of motives and constraints explaining sport consumptive behavior.

Among student populations, only Trail et al. (2008) studied the effect of constraints on football attendance decisions. The authors examined differences

in external, structural constraints (environmental/situational) between male and female students, as well as attendees and nonattendees of a university's football games. Overall, weather and work/school commitments were the highest rated constraints; however, significant differences were not detected based on prior attendance. More recently, the National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators (NACMA) commissioned a series of studies to better understand, among other things, the most influential factors driving student attendance, activities students would most likely be doing instead of attending games, and reasons why students do not attend football games (Guerra, 2015; NACMA, 2016).

The current study builds off the limited student attendance constraint literature in several ways. First, the data collection techniques employed in the studies cited above asked students to reflect back on times in the past when they did not attend a sporting event, as opposed to asking nonattendees directly (see Zhang, Pease, & Smith, 1996). Second, Trail et al. (2008) only considered structural constraints, which suggests a need to examine both internal and non-structural external constraints. Finally, a better understanding of how constraints affect different groups will allow marketers to become more effective in their segmentation strategies (Trail et al., 2008). The NACMA studies, for example, had a very robust sample, yet did not differentiate their constraint findings based on conference tier affiliation of respondents. This is an important factor to consider as schools at the Power 5, Group of 5, and Football Championship Series levels offer different products (i.e., media attention and perceived prestige) and vary greatly in the marketing resources available to attract students. Frequency of attendance is another important differentiator for college marketers to consider, as most marketing efforts should be focused on potential consumers most likely to attend. Additionally, taking into account when students make their decision to attend football games will allow marketers to better understand constraints facing students still considering attendance and may provide insight regarding appropriate marketing intervention strategies.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of constraints affecting college student decisions not to attend home football games. Three research questions were developed to guide this work:

**RQ1:** Are there differences in college students' constraints to attending football games based on conference tier affiliation ("Power 5", "Group of 5", Football Championship Series - FCS)?

**RQ2:** Are there differences in college students' constraints to attending football games based on frequency of attendance (persistent, occasional, never)?

**RQ3:** Are there differences in college students' constraints to attending football games based on when the decision was made not to attend (day of game, week of game, more than a week ago)?

## Methods

### Study Participants and Data Collection

Participants in this study were college students at six different schools in the Midwest and Southeast, representing varying conference tier affiliations (two FBS “Power 5” schools, two FBS “Group of 5” schools, two FCS schools). As the current study focuses on constraints to attendance, data collection took place on and surrounding campus during the time frame of a home football game. Intercept sampling was utilized to recruit study participants. The sample consisted of non-game attending students of the host school at various campus locations deemed by the researchers to be the most likely places where students with a possible interest in the football game would be instead of the actual game (e.g., tailgate lots after kickoff, Greek housing, dorm lobbies, sports bars near campus, on-campus housing, student union, campus recreation facilities, campus cafeteria). Students in these areas were approached by the researchers and asked to complete a paper/pencil questionnaire. Prior to participating in the study, the researchers confirmed the respondent was a current student at the school at the data collection site. A total of 511 questionnaires were distributed, of which 472 usable questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 92.3%. Of those, 136 (28.8%) respondents were from “Power 5” schools, 201 (42.6%) were from “Group of 5” schools, and 135 (28.6%) were from FCS schools. Approximately 47.7% of the sample was female. In terms of year in school, 33.5% of respondents were freshman, 25.0% sophomores, 15.5% juniors, 16.1% seniors, and 6.4% graduate students.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 50 items designed to assess constraints to football game attendance, frequency of attendance, and demographics. A total of 33 constraints were included in the questionnaire based on the work of Kim and Trail (2010), Trail et al. (2008), Pritchard et al. (2007), Ferreira and Armstrong (2004), as well as the two NACMA studies referenced above (Guerra, 2015; NACMA, 2016). Both internal and external constraints were assessed, representing six broad categories: stadium-related factors (i.e., constraints associated with stadium-specific attributes such as seating comfort or poor wifi accessibility), prior commitments (i.e., conflicting commitments to friends, work, family, etc...), intrapersonal factors (i.e., internal opinions, perceptions, or conditions related to the game/sport/event), event-related factors (i.e., constraints associated with the event itself, such as time of day, time commitment to attend, or team performance), marketing-related factors (i.e., constraints within the direct control of the marketing department including food and beverage costs, ticket costs, and awareness of the game), and game substitution options (i.e., alternative consumption options such as television or online). Constraints comprising each of these categories can be found in Tables 1–6. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a 7-point Likert scale, the extent to which each constraint impacted their

decision not to attend that day's home football game, with higher mean scores indicating greater impact.

**Table 1**

*Percentage of Respondents Affected by Marketing-Related Constraints*

	Conference Affiliation			Frequency of Attendance			Timing of Decision			
	Total	P5	G5	FCS	Persistent	Occasional	None	Gameday	This Week	Week+
Beverage cost	31.8	28.7	39.3	23.0	29.7	31.6	33.8	36.9	36.8	26.0
Food cost	27.4	25.0	32.8	20.0	20.8	27.4	30.9	30.3	30.2	22.8
No interest pregame festivities	20.7	22.8	21.9	16.3	8.9	19.1	28.8	16.4	15.1	26.5
No interest in-game entertain.	18.9	16.9	18.4	20.7	6.9	15.3	31.7	11.5	14.2	26.0
Didn't know about game	16.5	10.3	17.4	21.5	9.9	13.0	25.9	10.7	8.5	24.7
Ticket cost	14.3	8.1	20.4	11.1	8.9	11.6	20.1	11.5	12.3	15.3
Don't like concessions	14.0	8.1	20.9	9.6	9.9	12.1	20.1	11.5	12.3	15.3

Note: Values reflect percentage of respondents in each category indicating 5.0 or higher on 7.0 Likert scale.

**Table 2**

*Percentage of Respondents Affected by Prior Commitments*

	Conference Affiliation			Frequency of Attendance			Timing of Decision			
	Total	P5	G5	FCS	Persistent	Occasional	None	Gameday	This Week	Week+
School	45.5	72.8	41.8	23.0	38.6	51.6	40.3	41.8	57.5	42.3
Friend	35.9	28.7	32.3	48.1	29.7	34.4	41.0	29.5	40.6	37.2
Work	25.4	32.4	27.4	14.8	18.8	29.3	23.0	23.8	35.8	22.3
Significant others	16.8	11.0	23.9	11.9	13.9	18.6	16.5	14.8	21.7	15.3
Family	15.5	22.1	14.9	9.6	17.8	15.3	13.7	14.0	19.8	14.9
Nobody to go to game with	12.8	11.8	11.4	15.6	9.9	11.6	18.0	11.5	10.4	15.8

Note: Values reflect percentage of respondents in each category indicating 5.0 or higher on 7.0 Likert scale.

**Table 3**

*Percentage of Respondents Affected by Intrapersonal Constraints*

	Conference Affiliation			Frequency of Attendance			Timing of Decision			
	Total	P5	G5	FCS	Persistent	Occasional	None	Gameday	This Week	Week+
No interest in football	37.4	51.5	30.3	32.6	15.8	35.3	56.1	27.0	26.4	50.2
Not a fan of the team	23.0	21.3	20.9	27.4	7.9	19.5	38.1	19.7	12.3	30.7
Inappropriate fan behavior	11.5	8.1	15.9	8.1	8.9	9.3	15.8	10.7	10.4	12.6
Difficult to socialize	10.9	7.4	12.9	11.1	7.9	6.0	20.9	9.0	5.7	15.3
Football is too violent	8.3	5.1	10.9	7.4	5.0	9.8	8.6	9.8	9.4	7.9
Poor experience at a prior game	9.7	5.9	10.9	11.1	5.0	9.3	12.9	9.8	7.5	10.2

Note: Values reflect percentage of respondents in each category indicating 5.0 or higher on 7.0 Likert scale.

**Table 4**

*Percentage of Respondents Affected by Event-Specific Constraints*

	Conference Affiliation			Frequency of Attendance			Timing of Decision			
	Total	P5	G5	FCS	Persistent	Occasional	None	Gameday	This Week	Week+
Time commitment	28.7	41.9	20.4	27.4	17.8	28.8	36.7	26.2	33.0	30.2
Time of day	22.0	20.6	18.4	28.1	20.8	19.5	26.6	18.9	24.5	23.3
Low student interest	20.0	4.4	20.4	34.8	11.9	18.6	28.8	17.2	19.8	23.3
Team performance	18.4	6.6	24.9	20.7	20.8	18.1	15.1	23.8	17.0	14.0
Opponent	17.4	11.8	19.9	19.3	21.8	15.3	15.8	18.9	23.6	12.6
Weather	12.8	13.2	14.9	8.9	8.9	14.4	12.9	14.8	15.1	10.2

Note: Values reflect percentage of respondents in each category indicating 5.0 or higher on 7.0 Likert scale.

**Table 5**

*Percentage of Respondents Affected by Stadium-Related Constraints*

	Conference Affiliation			Frequency of Attendance			Timing of Decision			
	Total	P5	G5	FCS	Persistent	Occasional	None	Gameday	This Week	Week+
Traffic/parking	25.6	31.6	25.9	19.3	19.8	27.4	27.3	23.0	31.1	25.6
Stadium accessibility	18.0	16.2	9.0	33.3	11.9	14.4	26.6	14.8	15.1	22.8
Seating comfort	15.2	8.8	17.4	17.8	11.9	15.8	15.8	18.9	13.2	13.5
Wifi	13.6	6.6	20.4	10.4	13.9	13.5	12.2	18.9	12.3	9.3
Seating location	10.9	2.2	12.9	16.3	7.9	8.8	14.4	11.5	9.4	10.2

Note: Values reflect percentage of respondents in each category indicating 5.0 or higher on 7.0 Likert scale.

**Table 6**

*Percentage of Respondents Affected by Substitution Constraints*

	Conference Affiliation			Frequency of Attendance			Timing of Decision			
	Total	P5	G5	FCS	Persistent	Occasional	None	Gameday	This Week	Week+
Follow on social media/online	32.5	32.4	36.3	25.9	28.7	35.3	33.1	39.3	34.0	28.4
Watch game on TV	28.5	26.5	34.3	21.5	25.7	32.1	25.9	27.9	31.1	27.4
Watch other games on TV	17.6	5.9	20.9	23.7	12.9	19.5	19.4	18.0	17.0	16.7

Note: Values reflect percentage of respondents in each category indicating 5.0 or higher on 7.0 Likert scale.

**Data Analysis**

The data were initially subjected to a series of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) to test for significant differences for each of the research questions. MANOVA results reveal between-group mean score differences on a group of variables simultaneously (e.g., the difference in mean scores on the five stadium-related constraints between students at “Power 5”, “Group of 5” and FCS schools) (see Field, 2009). Following MANOVA tests, frequency analyses were conducted to enhance the practicality of the data.

**Results**

In terms of mean scores, only one constraint, prior school commitments, exceeded a 4.0 out of 7. When considered by category, substitution constraints had the highest mean scores (3.03), followed by prior commitments (3.00), event-specific (2.76), marketing-related (2.68), stadium-related (2.49), and intrapersonal constraints (2.39). Regarding the first research question, Wilk’s  $\Lambda$  values for all six constraints groupings were significant at the  $p < .05$  level. Subsequent analyses also revealed significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between “Power 5”, “Group of 5”, and FCS schools on 23 of the 33 constraints.

To analyze the data for RQ2, respondents were categorized by the number of games they intended to attend; respondents categorized as “persistent” ( $n = 101$ ) planned to attend four or more games during the current season, “occasional” ( $n = 215$ ) planned to attend one to three games, “none” ( $n = 139$ ) did not plan on attending a single football game. Wilk’s  $\Lambda$  values for the intrapersonal, marketing-related, prior commitments, and event-related constraints were significant at the  $p$

< .05 level; however, significant differences were not detected for stadium-related ( $p = .052$ ) and substitution ( $p = .547$ ) constraints. Overall, significant differences were detected on 12 of 33 individual constraints based on projected frequency of game attendance.

A similar pattern was detected with MANOVA results for RQ3. Respondents were grouped according to when they indicated making the decision not to attend the game: day of the game ( $n = 122$ ), in the past week leading up to the game ( $n = 106$ ), or a week or more prior to the game ( $n = 215$ ). Statistically significant Wilk's  $\Lambda$  values ( $p < .05$ ) were found for intrapersonal constraints, marketing-related constraints, stadium-related constraints, and prior commitments based on the when the respondent decided not to attend. Event-specific constraints ( $p = .073$ ) and substitution constraints ( $p = .321$ ) were not significant. In total, follow-up analyses revealed significant differences on 9 of the 33 individual constraints.

Statistically significant differences were plentiful in the analysis, and while a college athletics marketer at a "Group of 5" school may find it interesting to know students at her school rated a constraint significantly higher than those at a "Power 5" school, it may be more valuable to that practitioner to know the percentage of students acknowledging the presence of a particular constraint. For example, related to conference tier affiliation, mean scores (on a 7-point Likert scale) for beverage cost as a constraint were 3.01 for Power 5 students, 3.78 for Group of 5 students, and 2.67 for FCS students, with significant differences between Group of 5 and Power 5 ( $p < .01$ ), and FCS ( $p < .001$ ). Beverage costs were one of the strongest rated constraints across the sample as a whole, yet these values are relatively low. A frequency analysis depicts the data in a different, more useful way. As shown in Table 1, nearly 40% of students surveyed at "Group of 5" schools scored beverage cost at the venue as a 5.0 or higher on their questionnaire, indicating agreement that this specific constraint affected their decision not to attend the game. At "Power 5" schools, the percentage frequency was 28.7%, while at FCS schools, 23.0%. The values reported in Tables 1–6 represent the percentage of respondents scoring an individual constraint as 5.0 or above for each constraint tested.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the barriers to student attendance at college football games. In particular, the study sought out variation in reported constraints among potential student attendees (a) at schools from different conference tier affiliations, (b) based on the number of games they intended to attend, and (c) dependent upon when they made their decision not to attend. The short answer to all three research questions is yes; significant differences were detected on several constraints relevant to all three research questions. A key follow-up question then becomes: which specific differences among reported constraints are most critical to practitioners? It is important to note, not all



constraints can be viewed in the same context. From a practitioner perspective, the most valuable findings of this study are the highly rated constraints that can be impacted through marketing decisions.

While it is not possible or noteworthy to discuss every significant difference, we wish to point out a few key findings relative to each research question. First, results suggest students attending schools at different NCAA divisions do face different constraints. Whereas some constraints such as school and friend commitments are relatively high across the board, “Power 5” students appear to be much more cognizant of the time commitment necessary to attend a football game in person. This is likely due to an unwillingness to dedicate 3-4 hours of their Saturday to attending a game. Rather than expecting the entire student section to remain at the game for its duration, a possibility exists to offer bite-sized consumption options for students. Some may only be interested in being part of the atmosphere at the start of the game. Others may be interested in coming to the venue late in a close game, particularly if they are unable to commit to an entire afternoon due to school commitments, which appears to be a significant issue at “Power 5” programs. Allowing rolling entry/exit into the game for students, and communicating via mass text message or social media with students not in attendance about opportunities for late arrival may aid in keeping the stands full, and minimizing the time commitment constraint.

At the lower divisions, three constraints stand out. First, marketers are competing against “bigger” college football games being broadcast on television during their game. Both FCS schools in this study were situated in nearby proximity to larger programs. Rather than shying away from “big brother” programs, marketers at FCS schools should look for ways to embrace the fact that a large portion of their student population identify as fans of another school. Tactics as simple as scheduling games to avoid conflicts with local “Power 5” schools, or showing “Power 5” games on the televisions in the concourse may alleviate the intensity of this constraint. Second, interest in attending the game among the student body is low, and third, more than a fifth of students at FCS schools reported not even knowing there was a game. Low interest and lack of awareness are likely related. Educating students on dates, times, and transportation options is in direct control of athletic marketers. It should not be assumed students are reading email blasts or following athletic social media accounts. Further, communication efforts must advance beyond awareness and communicate benefits of attendance that resonate with the student body (e.g., opportunities to socialize with friends, affordable food and drink options, meaningful giveaways).

Persistent attendees represent an optimal target market for college sport marketers as this group attends more games than they do not. For this group, work and school constraints, and time commitments were not rated as highly as they were by less frequent attendees. It is unclear whether this is a matter of priorities, or if infrequent attendees are lesser identified with the team. It might

be easy to dismiss students who do not plan to attend games as a viable market; however, a sizeable percentage of respondents in this group are constrained by friend commitments (41.0%) and difficulty socializing with friends at games (20.9%). Even 29.7% of persistent attendees indicated prior commitments to friends inhibited their attendance. Marketers should strive to make a more “friend-friendly” atmosphere for students at their games. The University of Arkansas, for example, has been ahead of the curve in this regard. The Razorbacks offer student skyboxes at their stadium featuring lounge furniture and hi-definition televisions equipped with a cable sports package, designed specifically as a social space for students at the game (Thorpe, 2016).

The timing of attendance decisions is important for marketers to consider because it allows for the creative distribution of marketing messages aimed at those who are still on the fence about attending. Results suggested the ability to follow the game on social media was an acknowledged constraint for nearly 40% of students making the decision not to attend on the day of the game. It may hold that these students were presented with alternative plans, and knowing that they could follow along with the game on social media made it easier to skip the game in person. Regardless, social media communication efforts during the game should expand beyond play-by-play and illustrate the emotion and atmosphere at the venue through images, videos, and animations. Ideally, this will trigger a sense of missing out for those not in attendance. Clemson University’s athletic department excels at in-game storytelling on social media (Smith, 2015).

As noted above, food and beverage costs were barriers to attendance for a larger portion of the sample as a whole (27.4% and 31.8%, respectively); however, this was more pronounced for those making their weekend plans on game day or during the week leading up to the game, compared to those making their decision farther out. More than a third of those deciding not to attend on the day of the game indicated beverage cost was a constraint to attendance. Tapping into this group by offering drink-related promotions just for students, perhaps even after halftime as a way to entice students to stay at the games, may draw more students to games. Another alternative is to allow students to purchase food and non-alcoholic beverage in the venue with their meal plans. Marketers are encouraged to work with their concessionaires to design affordable food options for students.

## Summary

College students face myriad constraints when they decide whether to attend a game. Results from this study offer insight into the constraints keeping students away. Whereas some of the constraints, such as school or work commitments, exist outside of a marketer’s control, others can be addressed fairly easy by marketers. Additionally, college marketers must recognize students cannot be lumped into a single homogenous market. Constraints vary from school to school and from

student to student. Understanding how constraints affect students based on, for example, how frequently they attend or when they made their decision to attend, will make segmentation efforts more effective.

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