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Gap Analysis for Student Attendance at Collegiate Athletic Events: A Demonstration Project Update

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ABSTRACT

The day after winning the 2016 NCAA College World Series, Coastal Carolina moved from the Big South Conference to the Sun Belt Conference. This move required a 'step-up transition' in Football from Football Championship Series (FCS) to Football Bowl Series (FBS) competition. This transition will require increased investment in student scholarships, facilities, and travel. And, the University must increase its average paid attendance for home football games by 50% more than its former stadium capacity. Researchers in the business school updated an earlier study of student attendance at collegiate athletic events in order to provide value-added and impactful information to assist athletic administrators. By including both measures of importance and satisfaction (i.e. performance) with aspects of attending athletic events, it is possible to assess whether issues important to students in attending athletic events are producing the desired customer satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

A key component of success in today's business climate is the need to analyze the situation to determine the strengths and weaknesses of an enterprise. The notion of a "Strategic Window" being opened as part of the situation and available for a finite time prior to closure is an easy analogy to grasp (Abel 1978). Peter Drucker noted it is more important to "do the right thing" (effectiveness) than "to do things right" (efficiency) (Kotler 2003, p. 69).

In 1983, Coastal Carolina University (CCU) was a founding member of the Big South Conference (BSC), a Division I sports conference with teams located in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. In 2015, CCU accepted an invitation to join the Sun Belt Conference (SBC), a Division I sports conference with teams in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

The Sun Belt Conference, one of the Group of 5 (G5) conferences, competes in football at D-1 Football Bowl Series (FBS) level whereas the Big South competes at the D-1 Football Championship Series (FCS) level. This step-up in football level participation would require Coastal Carolina to expand football stadium seating capacity to maintain an average paid attendance of at least 15,000 for all home football games. Prior to this move, Coastal's Brooks Stadium had a seating capacity of approximately 9,300. At the time of this writing, a \$30 million

expansion is underway to create permanent seating for at least 20,000 fans (or, a doubling of the seating capacity of the stadium).

At the groundbreaking ceremony for the football stadium expansion, Athletic Director Matt Hogue provided the following observation (CCU 2017):

“As we embark on this latest project, I’m reminded of Former President Kennedy’s poignant words as he was speaking about the space program. He said [Begin Quote] we choose to pursue these things not because they are easy; but because they are hard. Because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.” [End Quote]. No matter the endeavor at this institution, I believe that is the CCU ethic. We overcome doubts. We uplift visions and we steam forward past challenges with a resolute desire to shape the institution’s greatness.

In 2008, researchers in the Wall College of Business at Coastal Carolina University examined the reasons for student attendance at CCU athletic events. Given the dramatic changes in athletics (introduction of new sports, new/expanded facilities, new media to promote sports, and a growing student body), researchers decided to replicate the 8-year old study.

The purpose of this manuscript is to outline this two-wave research study. Students in the College of Business (in conjunction with their instructors) crafted this study to seek input from the 2008 and 2016 student bodies. Such input will be used by the Athletic Department to critically evaluate past and present efforts to increase student attendance at sporting events and to plan future efforts to do so. Thus, a key component of this study is to identify the critical issues facing the athletic department in getting students to attend events and to assess their relative performance in dealing with such issues by measuring student satisfaction. Known as Gap Analysis (originally advanced by Martilla and James 1977), we hope to assist athletic directors in their desire to “walk their talk.” That is, we hope to assist them in their desire to focus their efforts on items of greatest importance to their students.

This manuscript is organized as follows. First, the contextual background for this study is provided, including: (a) an overview of Coastal Carolina University; (b) an overview of its invitation to join the Sun Belt Conference, and (c) the impetus for this study. Second, the mission-driven benefits of such student-driven research projects (particularly for AACSB Business Schools) are outlined with specific reference to CCU’s Wall College of Business. Third, an overview of Importance-Performance Analysis is presented. Next, the study methodology and results are provided. Finally, conclusions are offered based on these results. The preparation of this manuscript is driven by the desire to outline a process used by one AACSB member with other institutions similarly interested in active learning and attendance at intercollegiate athletic events. The actual quantitative results are equally important to the dynamics of sharing methodologies and instruments with academic colleagues.

Coastal Carolina University is located in Conway, SC, a river community nine miles inland from Myrtle Beach. The 2-county Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) (Horry County, SC and Brunswick County, NC) has been consistently reported to be the second-fastest growing MSA in the United States in recent years according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Since 2010, the population of the MSA has grown from 376,000 to 449,000 (an increase of 19%). This nets out to an average increase of over 1,000 residents to the region every month. So, Coastal Carolina University is a growth-oriented institution in a growing community.

Coastal Carolina University has experienced a consistent growth in enrollment since its founding as a stand-alone independent institution in 1993. For example, undergraduate enrollment grew from approximately 5,000 students in 2001 to over 8,500 students in 2011. This increase of 3,500 students represents a 70% increase in undergraduate enrollment. In the last 5 years, Coastal Carolina has followed a controlled growth strategy. In 2012, the University initiated its largest building program (\$244 million in capital-funded projects) in its history. In 2016, the newly-adopted strategic plan (*High Impact: The Coastal Carolina University 2016-2021 Strategic Plan*) targeted growth by 2.5 – 3.0% annually toward 12,500 students by 2023.

The mission of CCU Athletic is to “provide our student-athletes the opportunities to reach their potential as responsible and productive citizens. This is accomplished by fostering a culture of success academically, athletically and personally. Athletic participation has the ability to provide an added dimension to the overall college experience of a student and to benefit the student in their personal and professional challenges.” Coastal Carolina University supports 19 sports at the Division I level:

- **Women’s Teams:** Basketball, Beach Volleyball, Cross Country, Golf, Indoor Track and Field, Lacrosse, Soccer, Softball, Tennis, Outdoor Track and Field, and Volleyball.
- **Men’s Teams:** Baseball, Basketball, Cross Country, Football, Golf, Soccer, Tennis, and Outdoor Track and Field.

While a member of the Big South Conference, CCU was a frequent recipient Big South Conference's George F. "Buddy" Sasser Cup Trophy, a recognition of the accumulated athletic success for all sports during an academic year. In May 2015, Coastal was awarded its 11th Sasser Cup, then tied with Liberty University for first place in number of Sasser Cups earned (CCU 2015).

In 2015, the Sun Belt Conference was actively seeking a member institution in close proximity to Appalachian State (located in Boone, NC) to further implement its ‘travel partner’ strategy for the scheduling of athletic competitions. That is, the conference consists of 2-team clusters for scheduling athletic competitions. Coastal’s recent athletic success, along with its academic profile, facilities, and growing student body, made it an attractive expansion partner.

Coastal Carolina University officially joined the Sun Belt Conference on July 1, 2016 (the day after its Men’s Baseball Team won the NCAA Championship). A press release from the Sun Belt Conference on that day outlined this geographic strategy this way (SBC 2016):

With the addition of Coastal Carolina, the Sun Belt Conference will now have a symmetrical, geographic structure that is unparalleled in the history of the conference. The league will have two universities in Alabama (South Alabama and Troy), Arkansas (Arkansas State and Little Rock), Georgia (Georgia Southern and Georgia State), Louisiana (UL Lafayette and UL Monroe) and Texas (UT Arlington and Texas State) to go with Appalachian State in North Carolina and Coastal Carolina in neighboring South Carolina.

At the end of its first year in the Sun Belt Conference, Coastal Carolina tied for 4th place in the Bubas Cup Standings, a measure of overall athletics success akin to the Sasser Cup of the Big South Conference. This is noteworthy as CCU was ineligible to earn points in Football as it moves through the NCAA required 2-year transition from FCS to FBS Football.

In the Wall College, we work continuously to enhance interaction among students, faculty, and the business community. We seek to engage students in the learning process under the assumption that they remember only 10% of what they hear, but remember 90% of what they do. Active learning enables students to create a learning experience and begin to achieve the higher order learning objective of analysis and integration of content at a practical level (Anderson 1997). And, we seek to create active learning projects to be done in conjunction with important stakeholders, both on- and off-campus. Finally, partner projects on-campus allow us to create and reinforce a sense of community and connectedness among various university departments. Collectively, we are Coastal Carolina University. Marketing faculty and the consultant collaborated to perform a Gap Analysis for the Athletics Department to assess the current and changing situation.

Today's college student has a variety of options to choose from when deciding how to spend their leisure time and entertainment dollar. One option is collegiate athletics. Indeed, marketing wars are fought to attract students to athletic events and won or lost on the basis of competitive advantage. In the definition of strategy used here, competitive advantage comes from the intersection of focus, flexibility, and sacrifice (Reis and Trout 1986).

- **Focus** means finding the “hole” in the market or the target market where the product or service has special appeal and exploiting what is important; and, concentrating on winning the marketing battle to get satisfaction.
- **Flexibility** means marketers selectively modify the product or service delivery to match the customer needs or requirements as far as possible to build loyalty. So, where important things are not being satisfied, changes must be made.
- Finally, **Sacrifice** means it is impossible to be all things to all people in all collegiate athletics.

It is contended here that knowing what is in the mind of the customer is the first step in crafting strategy from a situation analysis. In the context of a strategic planning process, we must establish a baseline of customer perceptions of recent performance before determining, what (if any) changes ought to be considered in our products and programs.

Partnership: College of Business and Athletic Department

Business Schools accredited by AACSB – The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business – commit to a program of self- and peer-assessment, continuous improvement, and assessment of outcomes in light of the Business School’s missions. And, with the release of the 2013 Accreditation Standards, Business Schools are challenged to focus on ENGAGEMENT, INNOVATION, and IMPACT of their teaching, research, and service work. Business Schools can serve a variety of internal and external stakeholders. Let’s assume:

- A class projects is conducted to provide an active learning experience.
- A faculty member participates in this project.
- The partner/client benefits from the results of this research study.

When administered, such partnerships with on-campus stakeholders (such as the Athletic Department) allows business schools to fulfill the following expectations as stated in the 2013 AACSB Standards of Accreditation.

AACSB Standard	Implementation
<p>Standard 1: The school articulates a clear and distinctive mission, <u>the expected outcomes this mission implies</u>, and strategies outlining how these outcomes will be achieved. The school has a history of achievement and improvement and specifies future actions for continuous improvement and innovation consistent with this mission, expected outcomes, and strategies. [MISSION, IMPACT, AND INNOVATION]</p> <p>Standard 15: The school maintains and strategically deploys participating and supporting faculty who collectively and individually demonstrate significant academic and <u>professional engagement that sustains the intellectual capital necessary to support high-quality outcomes</u> consistent with the school's mission and strategies. [FACULTY QUALIFICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT]</p>	<p>Most Business School mission statements make some explicit reference to serving the region and sharing expertise with stakeholders.</p> <p>Then, Business School faculty must follow through on this stated commitment by producing a portfolio of service engagements to illustrate mission fulfillment.</p>
<p>Standard 13: Curricula facilitate <u>student academic and professional engagement appropriate to the degree program type</u> and learning goals. [STUDENT ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT]</p>	<p>Most Business Schools have courses that include applied learning class projects to ensure an active learning.</p>

Accreditation by AACSB can be described as a mission-driven program of continuous improvement. Institutions are assessed relative to their performance to published standards in light of the School’s mission. For Coastal, the College of Business is held to the following mission:

The mission of the E. Craig Wall Sr. College of Business Administration is to guide and educate each student in the development of valuable skills for a successful career in a globally competitive and diverse environment. With particular focus on four critical components in order to sustain and enact this mission, the Wall College will:

1. Educate **STUDENTS** in critical thinking, communication, and professionalism through applied and experiential learning using a variety of teaching techniques and innovative technologies.
2. Develop, maintain, and execute a **CURRICULUM** emphasizing the integration of business functions in order to provide students with a complete and unified understanding of business.
3. Develop **FACULTY** intellectual capital by creating a portfolio of diversified intellectual contributions in applied, basic/discovery, integrative/interdisciplinary, and pedagogical (teaching and learning) scholarship.
4. Offer service to the larger COMMUNITY that utilizes and further enhances faculty expertise. Such efforts will, in turn, expand and enhance opportunities for students through cooperative research, internships, or improved course and curriculum design.

Conducting marketing research for a partner client delivers the following outcomes:

1. The student researchers participate in Applied and Experiential learning.
2. The student researchers make the connection between research results and decisions made by marketing strategists.
3. Faculty/authors can share their work with academic peers to showcase (depending on manuscript design): (a) applied research; or (b) pedagogical research.
4. The completed project serves the needs of the partner/client by enhancing their ability to make data-driven decisions.

Recent research by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2014) found that athletics expenses are rising at an annual rate of approximately 7% and that revenues (from current sources) are not expanding as quickly. NCAA research (2009) found spending for athletics increased 43 percent between 2004 and 2008 while revenue increased by 33% during the same period. Against this backdrop, athletic administrators are becoming increasingly motivated to address the specific needs of each target audience group, including students.

Professor Ted Levitt (1960), in his well-known seminal piece “Marketing Myopia”, warned marketers to avoid myopia in defining their markets, consumers, product uses, reasons for buying, and other consumer-related matters. Extended to athletics, today’s sports marketers well-recognize they are offering an entertainment option in a crowded marketplace. In response, the in-stadium fan experience continues to evolve with the introduction of enhanced WiFi and DAS (Digital Antenna Systems) access, game-oriented smart-phone applications, unique video footage only available to in-stadium patrons, the ability to order concessions from your seats, and other innovations which are key to attracting and retaining young fans (3).

According to a Wall Street Journal study, the average student attendance at college football games from 2009 – 2013 was down (on average) 7.1% for all institutions (n=79) and 5.6% for the members of the 5 Power conferences. To be clear, some schools have seen increases in their student attendance. But, on average, fewer students are attending college football games when all schools are added together. The decline in student attendance is attributed to a variety of factors, including rising ticket prices, more lopsided games, fewer match-ups with long-time rivals, and the proliferation of television and internet broadcasts (Cohen, 2014).

In 2012, Coastal Carolina University implemented the 54-in-54 Initiative. (Note, Coastal Carolina started in 1954; hence the “54.”) Fans were asked to recommend enhancements to the Football Stadium and Fan Experience (CCU, 2012). From the information, 54 enhancements able to be implemented EACH YEAR were identified (162 enhancements in all). In addition, CCU made the following substantial changes in its athletics program in the last 10 years:

- Completion of Atkins Fieldhouse and New Football Seating
- Installation of synthetic Teal sports turf
- Updated Baseball Stadium (Springs Brooks Stadium)
- Opening of HTC Center (Basketball, Volleyball)
- Introduction of Luxury Suite Access for Football, Baseball, and Basketball
- Introduction of new sports (Women’s Lacrosse, Women’s Beach Volleyball)
- Growth in utilization of Social and Mobile Media to better connect with their fans.

It must be noted that the shift from the Big South Conference to the Sun Belt Conference does puts CCU in a new peer group. This new peer group tends to have more student-athletes, larger facilities, larger fan bases, greater media coverage, larger travel distances, etc. Concurrently, it brings the promise of enhanced revenue sharing, access of College Football Playoff revenue sharing, greater conference access to NCAA championships, the possibility of competing in Football Bowl Games, and other tangible and intangible benefits.

In general, studies which focus on the assessment of outcomes tend to focus solely either on importance of outcomes or performance toward standards and thus do not provide a complete picture of current activities and mission fulfillment. Evaluating importance of outcomes and performance toward standards are both important. Taken separately, however, it can be difficult to convert such measures into practical strategic responses. The use of Importance-Performance Analysis can help to avoid these potential problem areas and demystify the results in such a way that decision-makers may more easily use them for developing specific action steps for their organizations. Briefly, Importance-Performance Analysis involves measuring the IMPORTANCE and the PERFORMANCE of a stimulus and then creating a graphical display of the results on a two dimensional (i.e., 2x2) "action grid." The 2x2 Importance-Performance grid presented contains four quadrants:

1. **Concentrate Here** – High Importance, Low Performance
2. **Keep Up the Good Work** - High Importance, High Performance
3. **Low Priority** – Low Importance, Low Performance
4. **Possible Overkill** - Low Importance, High Performance

METHODOLOGY

Students enrolled in Marketing courses at Coastal Carolina University worked with their instructors to gather data and conduct a Gap Analysis for CCU's Athletics in 2008 and 2016. The questionnaire used in this study was based upon one developed by McCullough and Fullerton (2008) and appears in the Appendix. The finalized questionnaire was posted to a unique Internet address for data collection. Online data collection software was used to collect information. The email addresses of CCU students were generated through a snowball sampling procedure.

Respondents were offered a copy of the results upon completion of the study to stimulate participation (Goodman 2006). The 2008 survey utilized a seven day field period and generated 578 responses received from a student population of around 7,800. Assuming a good database of addresses (and that is an unknown), we received around a 33% response rate with a 78% completion rate. The 2016 survey generated 1,322 responses in a nine day field period. Although with the response and completion rates found there are concerns regarding non-response error, recognition must be made that we did, in fact, live our mission statement: we used active learning to enhance student learning and we help an important stakeholder (our colleagues in Athletics) collect important customer feedback.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Typically, the results for this type of analysis are presented using the 'top box' results. In the context of this research that means the percentage of students who checked "Very Important" and "Very Satisfied." To display the data visually, Brand Map software was utilized to show graphically how the performance attributes are arranged in a GAP analysis format. The results are presented below in **Table 1** and graphically in **Figures 1 and 2**.

Table 1
Top – Box Importance and Satisfaction Ratings for Eight Attributes

Attribute	2008		2016	
	Importance	Performance	Importance	Performance
Tickets	30%	36%	48%	44%
Team Wins	30%	12%	35%	33%
Stadium-Arena	36%	18%	45%	31%
Promotions	21%	24%	32%	77%
Group Goes	33%	11%	44%	15%
Easy Transportation	25%	13%	39%	27%
Festive Environment	45%	12%	55%	21%
Knows Players	15%	9%	23%	13%

Figure 1
2008 Gap Analysis Using a Quadrant Chart

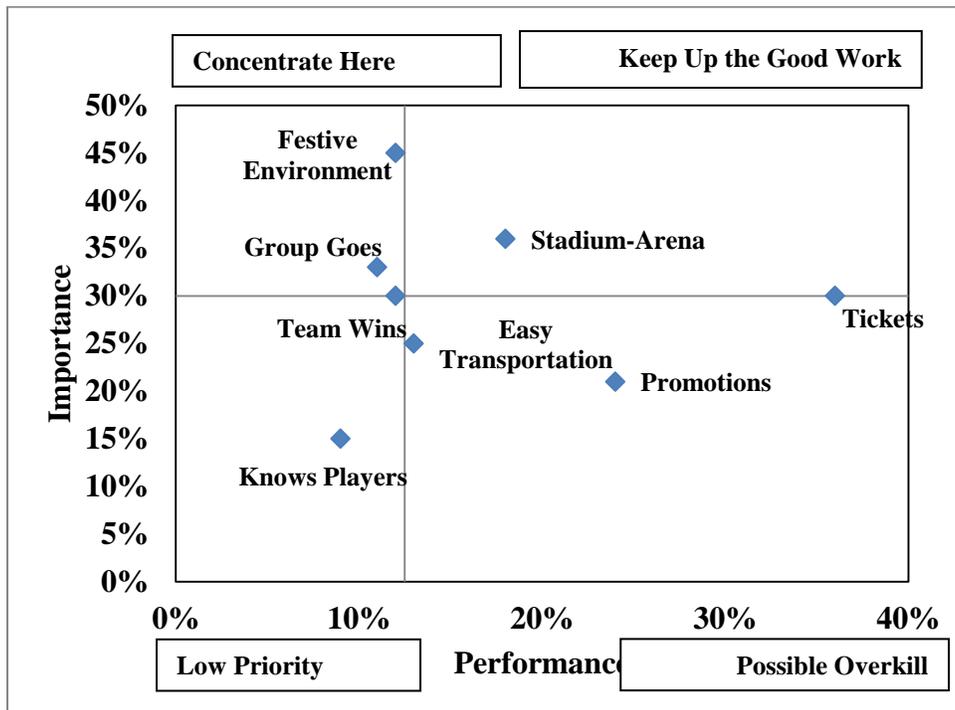
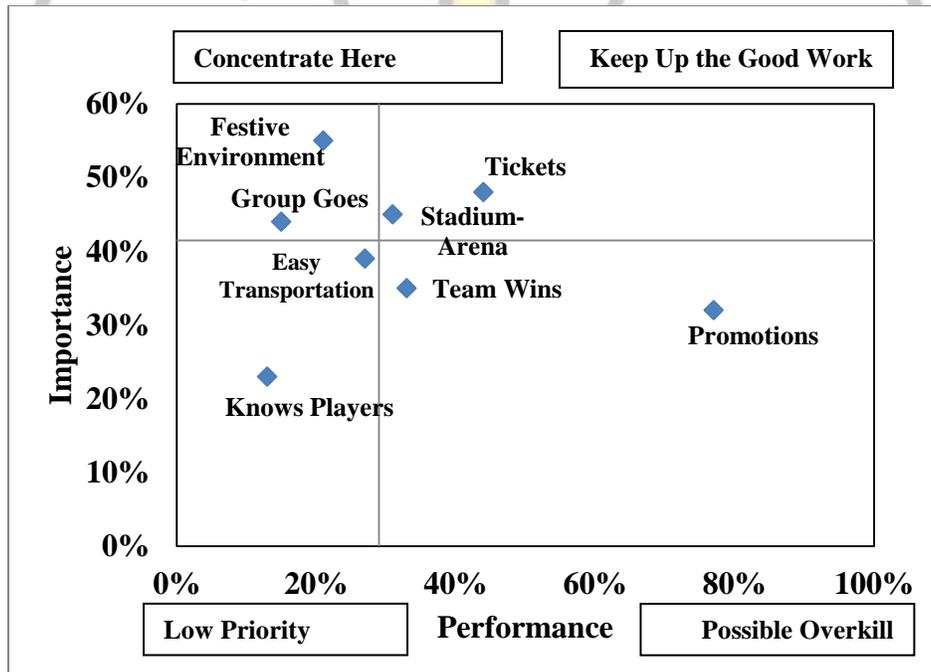


Figure 2
2016 Gap Analysis Using a Quadrant Chart



Since a traditional Gap Analysis using Brand Map uses only top – box percentages for both Importance and Performance (Satisfaction) ratings on each of the eight attributes from the questionnaire, only those data are presented in Table One and used to create the quadrant chart in Figure Two.

A clustering of responses in the High-Importance / High-Satisfaction Quadrant is the desired outcome for the organization being assessed (e.g., keep up the good work!). It indicates they are focusing efforts on important matters. They are “walking their talk.” Such is the evaluation here for only Stadium-Arena where a relatively Important attribute is also relatively high in Satisfaction. Tickets are on the borderline and are highest in satisfaction probably because ticket cost is ‘hidden’ in student fees paid with tuition. Festive environment is relatively high in Importance and relatively low in Satisfaction, presumably due to the no-alcohol policy on campus as indicated by student comments. Improvement could be made in Easy Transportation presumably due to lack of parking near the Football stadium, but this is a relatively low priority item. Game day promotions relationships with players are low in Importance and Satisfaction and therefore not an issue when it comes to improvement. The won-loss record of the team and the tendency of students to attend events in groups are not issues to be addressed since they are near the origin of the map.

The map presented above as Figure Two is for all students. Similar maps could be constructed for segments of the student body based on the demographics included in the questionnaire.

A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

The research process outlined here represents a mission-driven effort to fuse the teaching, research, and service efforts of the faculty. A synergy can be created by leveraging our efforts accordingly. The project outlined here achieved the following outcomes:

- We enhanced student learning in our Marketing classes through active learning.
- We used technology (on-line survey software) to facilitate data collection and provided an active learning experience.
- We collected input from important stakeholders (students) for use by the Athletic Department in evaluating and planning efforts.
- We provided a value-added public service to an important stakeholder (sharing the results of the study with students and the Athletic Department).

This work is presented here to provide academic colleagues at other universities subject matter, methodology, technology support, and other research components for consideration at their respective institutions. Replication is possible for a variety of specific sports such as Football and Women’s Softball, and so on. Students can evaluate the performance of all collegiate athletics at CCU to address our central question: “are we as an institution walking our talk?” In our case, the answer is “yes” in general. We offer our work as a value added demonstration

project for other universities seeking similar outcomes regarding an important aspect of their institution, what is important and how is performance in college athletics.

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