Selling Beer at College Athletic Events

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Alcohol is available for purchase at most professional sporting events and has recently been made available at various collegiate sporting events. About 25 percent of Division I football programs sell alcohol in their stadiums (Mitchell & Montgomery, 2015). Many supporters of selling alcohol at college games say that it will generate extra revenue while also decreasing alcohol-related issues like binge drinking (New, 2016). However, some argue that allowing alcohol sales will encourage alcohol use among college students and expose the college to various safety and legal issues (Mitchell & Montgomery, 2015). The author will examine the benefits and potential drawbacks of selling beer at college sporting events, and conclude with a recommendation for Division I programs to sell beer at sporting events for the sake of increased revenue and the promotion of responsible drinking behaviors.

Mitchell and Montgomery (2015) reported that in 2011 West Virginia University (WVU) began selling beer at its football games in an effort to increase revenue and decrease alcohol-related incidents at tailgates. The WVU Police Department reported a 35 percent decrease in alcohol-related incidents on game days since the introduction of alcohol sales and stadium guidelines for distribution (Mitchell & Montgomery, 2015). The Ohio State University (OSU) began selling alcohol at games during the 2016-2017 school year, and ejected two fans from the stadium in their home opener, which is lower than their average of 12 ejections per game (New, 2016). By having the option to purchase alcohol in the stadium, many fans have been drinking less before games, and the higher prices of beer at the stadium helps to reduce the amount of alcohol fans consume during the game (Augustin, Traugutt, & Morse, 2018). The sale of alcohol in the stadium may also increase the institutions ability to control how much alcohol is being distributed, and to do so in a responsible manner.

This responsible distribution of beer also creates a new source of revenue for colleges. WVU has earned over $3 million in revenue from beer sales and OSU plans to hire new police officers and fund research on alcohol consumption with a portion of its new revenue (New, 2016). These staffing additions and research opportunities are not something that would have been achieved so quickly without creating a new source of revenue. The beer sales at WVU and OSU had an immediate impact on their concession revenue that enabled them to invest in new opportunities. While the financial and personal conduct benefits experienced by WVU and OSU are clear, their experiences are not easily recreated at other Division I colleges.

Many colleges have attempted to use alcohol sales in their stadiums not only as a way to add a new revenue source, but to bolster falling ticket sales (Augustin et al., 2018; Chastin, Gohmann, & Stephenson, 2017). This idea does have the potential to work, as demonstrated by the University of Louisiana-Lafayette experiencing a 34 percent attendance increase in their first year of stadium beer sales (Augustin et al., 2018). After the University of Colorado-Boulder banned beer sales in 1996 they saw a 29 percent decrease in season ticket holders (Augustin et al., 2018). While Louisiana-Lafayette and Colorado-Boulder saw dramatic changes in their ticket sales, their experience is not universally applicable.
Many mid-major college football programs such as Bowling Green State University, Kent State University, and the University of Hawaii-Manoa, saw little significant increase in ticket sales after they elected to sell beer at their sporting events (Augstin et al., 2018; Chastin et al., 2017). Colleges should be looking at all of the potential variables, such as the home and away team winning percentages, conference vs. non-conference games, and the perceived significance the game has on a playoff appearance, that can cause fluctuations in attendance. By doing so, colleges can potentially identify which games may be perceived as popular and come up with an appropriate marketing strategy to attract more fans. It is a combination of factors that affects ticket sales, not just the decision on whether or not to sell beer.

Alcohol use also continues to be an issue for many colleges, most of it being out of their control (McMurtrie, 2016). Approximately 600,000 are injured while drunk, 100,000 are victims of alcohol-induced sexual assault, and 1,800 die every year due to alcohol (McMurtrie, 2016). As student personnel work to reduce these numbers, selling alcohol in stadiums can give the student body, which is mostly under the age of 21, the impression that the college is encouraging student alcohol consumption (Huang & Dixon, 2013; Mitchell & Montgomery, 2015). By selling alcohol, vendors place themselves in legal risk with dram shop laws. If someone were to be injured by an intoxicated fan at an event, the injured can file suit against the supplier of alcohol (Mitchell & Montgomery, 2015). Should intoxicated fans turn violent or severely ill, not only would the safety of others be at risk, but there is also the potential cost of litigation to protect the college from lawsuits. If colleges chose to sell beer at their games, they must also ensure that they are promoting responsible drinking behaviors during sporting events and on-campus in general.

Based on evidence gathered through a variety of studies, adding beer sales to Division I sporting events can cause most programs to see an increase in their revenue in terms of concessions (Augustin et al., 2018; Chastin et al., 2017; Huang & Dixon, 2013). There is little evidence to suggest that beer sales significantly affect attendance, with the exception of a few outliers mentioned earlier. Since the increase in concessions revenue is noticeable when beer is sold in college stadiums, alcohol sales should be standard in college athletics. While concessions are just one small part of the athletics revenue stream, every little bit can help. However, colleges still need to be aware of the potential risks of allowing alcohol into their stadiums and to be proactive with educating their students on responsible alcohol use.

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References


