Evolving the core product: stakeholder’s perceptions of the NCAA wrestling season

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Research Problem

The purpose of the research surveyed critical stakeholders of intercollegiate wrestling (e.g., coaches, consumers, officials, and student-athletes) to identify potential strategies to enhance the quality of the college wrestling product. In particular, the research was designed to explore the format and content of the NCAA Division I wrestling season to uncover avenues of untapped commercial potential. With an analysis of stakeholder perceptions of the college wrestling season, the NWCA and advocates of college wrestling are provided with necessary data to make effective decisions about how to position the college wrestling season and enhance the quality of the season currently being implemented in college wrestling.

Issues

During the past 25 years, Universities and athletic directors have made the decision to eliminate more than 130 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) wrestling programs (NCAA Sports Sponsorship, 2008). While many advocates of college wrestling in the United States have blamed Title IX for program eliminations, several scholars have illustrated that the attrition of men’s non-revenue teams is instead due to the lavish spending on men’s basketball and men’s football within athletic departments (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003, Zimbalist, 2003). With the economic challenges and the “arms race,” it is imperative for college wrestling to develop strategies to ensure that each of its programs are self-sustainable in future years.

Summary

Following the distribution of the survey instrument, the data supported the notion that stakeholders of intercollegiate wrestling (coaches [N = 77], consumers [N = 954], officials [N = 29], and student-athletes [N = 279]) unanimously agreed upon several strategies to improve the quality of the schedule offered within the college wrestling product. In addition to several critical suggestions discussed in the article, stakeholders unanimously supported an adjustment in the college wrestling post-season to avoid March Madness (M = 4.95; SD = 1.23) and the high school wrestling state championships (M = 4.43; SD = 1.41). Several other critical findings are presented in the research.
Analysis

In an effort to fortify wrestling programs against elimination, the NWCA and advocates of amateur wrestling must identify strategies to improve the college wrestling product. With the growing emphasis on profit maximization in today's economic and intercollegiate athletic environment (Marburger & Hogshead-Makar, 2003; Zimbalist, 2003), it is clear that non-revenue programs such as men's wrestling must find ways to improve the revenues realized by the programs if they are going survive in future generations. While marketing-based initiatives are important for the future of college wrestling, they are not going to be fully effective unless the NWCA finds ways to improve the current core product being offered to consumers (Cooper & Weight, 2009). Thus, the NCAA wrestling schedule (and related format) is a critical element to the sustainability of this sport in future generations.

Discussions/Implications

The current research provides the NWCA with necessary data to work with college wrestling coaches and the NCAA to adjust the format of the current college wrestling season. Further, this research provides a framework to examine the core product being offered in other non-revenue Olympic sports. In particular, the study provides an example of the potential improvements that can be realized from analyzing stakeholder’s perceptions of the sport product being offered to consumers. With the economic challenges in the United States, scholars should continue to develop strategies to enhance the sustainability of men's and women's nonrevenue sports.