

**Prime Time's Public Relations Powerplay: Elevating the University of Colorado Boulder
with Deion Sanders's Influence**

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Introduction

In the archives of sports history, few names shine as brightly as Deion Sanders. A legend in the touchdown zone and on the baseball diamond, Sanders set the standards of how a true athlete performs. Beyond his playing time in the National Football League, Sanders is now known as “Coach Prime” since he plays an essential coaching role in collegiate football. On December 3, 2022, the University of Colorado entered its “Prime Time” era, naming him its new head football coach. Sanders brought his unique blend of charisma, passion, and commitment to excellence to the sidelines of CU Boulder’s football program, completely transforming the program. In 2022, CU Boulder lost 11 football games, achieving victory in only one game. Although he’s only been in Boulder briefly, Sanders has emerged as a symbol of transformation, revival, and hope for the University of Colorado. He has used various public relations strategies by bringing a massive media presence to CU Boulder – one its athletics have never seen before. Notable news programs like *60 Minutes*, *Fox*, *Good Morning America*, and *ESPN* have interviewed CU Boulder’s athletic department, which reflects on the entire university. School spirit has also increased within campus culture as more students wear Colorado gear and uphold a maximum-filled student section at football games. All these aspects are excellent; however, the underlying question is how long will CU Boulder’s spotlight last?

My thesis seeks to uncover how Sanders’ leadership as a head coach might leave a long-lasting mark on the University of Colorado. I delve into the multifaceted dimensions of his influence and explore the academic and cultural shifts that have occurred under his guidance. Through this exploration, we will understand how Sanders’s dedication and vision has shaped a university, igniting a renewed sense of pride, aspiration, and unity within CU Boulder’s community. More importantly, we will see how CU Boulder can leverage Sanders’s athletic

impact on the school's overall academic success. Obtaining insight into Deion Sanders's high-profile publicity and strong media presence is essential for comprehending his influence on campus culture and community engagement at the University of Colorado and, consequently, his role in shaping academic excellence. Through a comprehensive analysis of Sanders's brand attributes, this thesis seeks to provide strategic integration of key components from his brand into the University of Colorado's public relations framework.

Literature Review

Deion Sanders

Deion Sanders was born on August 9, 1967, and became one of the most profound American athletes of all time. Sanders attended North Fort Myers High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where his exceptional athletic abilities became evident in both football and baseball. The Kansas City Royals selected him in the sixth round in 1985 out of high school; however, Sanders had other plans. His incredible athletic performances throughout high school earned him a scholarship to Florida State University, allowing him to continue playing both sports. Sanders also competed in track meets, and he was an accomplished champion in the 100 and 200 meters and 4x100 relay, where he led FSU's track and field team to its 10th conference championship (Augustyn, 2023). Alternatively, Sanders was a cornerback and punt returner in football. He broke FSU's punt record for career punt return yards. He also made an interception with five seconds left, which sealed FSU's 13-7 win over Auburn in the 1989 Sugar Bowl. Due to these collegiate athletic accomplishments, Sanders won the Thorpe Award as the nation's best defensive back his senior year and was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2011 (Schulte, 2023). At the same time, Sanders played outfield on FSU's baseball team, which

finished fifth in the nation. During his senior year, he skipped baseball to focus on football, ultimately preparing for the National Football League (NFL) draft. Sanders was incredibly confident about his chances in the NFL draft that he walked out of a pre-draft interview with the New York Giants after discovering they had the 10th overall pick, knowing he would be drafted before that (Kelly, 2020).

With this surge of confidence, the Atlanta Falcons selected him as the fifth overall pick in the 1989 NFL draft. Sanders's athletic impact was immediate in the NFL as he showcased his speed and playmaking ability as a cornerback and kick returner. He had his "Welcome to the NFL" moment when he returned a punt 68 yards for a touchdown in his first game. His stardom continued throughout his 14-season, 188-game career. He ended up playing for five different professional football teams: the Atlanta Falcons (1989-1993), San Francisco 49ers (1994), Dallas Cowboys (1995-1999), Washington Redskins (2000), and Baltimore Ravens (2003-2005). Throughout his profound career, he scored a total of six touchdowns on punt returns, three touchdowns on kickoff returns, and returned nine interceptions for scores (Pro Football Hall of Fame). In 1994, when he played with the San Francisco 49ers, his career statistics made him the third best in the NFL, earning him the NFL's Defensive Player of the Year award. Sanders ended up winning two Super Bowls, one against the San Diego Chargers in 1995 when he played for the 49ers (Super Bowl XXIX), and the other against the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1996 when he played for the Dallas Cowboys (Super Bowl XXX).

In addition to Sanders's success in the NFL, he also pursued a Major League Baseball (MLB) career. The New York Yankees drafted Sanders in the 30th round of the 1988 MLB draft. He played primarily on the New York Yankees' minor league system in 1989 but was called up for 14 games in the majors that summer (Augustyn, 2023). Sanders played nine MLB seasons,

playing for four different professional baseball teams: New York Yankees (1989-1990), Atlanta Braves (1991-1994), Cincinnati Reds (1994, 1997, 2001), and San Francisco Giants (1995) before retiring in 2001. Sanders had a 0.263 batting average throughout his MLB career, 39 home runs, 168 run batted-ins, and 186 stolen bases (Bengel, 2022). When he played for the Atlanta Braves, he helped them win the World Series against the Toronto Blue Jays.

Sanders's dual-sport abilities aren't the only elements that put him on the media's radar. During his time at FSU, quarterback Brad Johnson described him, stating, "In practice, he was quiet. Prime was into getting better and into working. That's who he was. He was an endless worker. Now, on game day, he became Prime Time when the bright lights came on. He could turn it on." This allowed Sanders to become a popular athlete to cover in the sports media industry as he brought a new form of entertainment to the field. Sanders even arrived in a white stretch limousine in tuxedo attire at a 1988 game against FSU's rival, the University of Florida (Augustyn, 2023). Furthermore, when Sanders saw his NFL salary, it did not meet his standards since a defensive back was one of the lowest-paid positions at the time. However, Sanders's "Prime Time" nickname originated from a teammate after he had a successful basketball game in high school (Rhodes, 2023). Realizing the potential to leverage his flamboyant public personality, Sanders decided to build a brand around "Prime Time" – and the media loved it (Fragoza, 2022).

It was evident that Sanders was confident on and off the field, which attracted the media to cover his versatile career positively. In addition, Sanders became a fashion icon by introducing a style that redefined NFL attire. Sanders wore a variety of sparkling jewelry, sunglasses, and designer outfits to match his exuberant personality. He wanted to be remembered for more than his accomplishments on the field, as he stated, "I wanted to leave a mark on the fashion world,

and I believe I've done that" (Bloss, 2023). Sanders's flashy swagger made him a highly marketable athlete, resulting in him securing prominent endorsement deals. He had a long-standing partnership with Nike as his "Prime Time" charisma and athletic abilities perfectly fit the athletic apparel industry. Together, they created the Nike Air Diamond Turf shoe line. Sanders had other partnerships with high-profile companies like Pepsi, Pizza Hut, Sprint, and Mustang. These collaborations highlighted the other side of Sanders's brand, increasing his visibility beyond sports. In addition, Sanders made headlines on the field when he created an iconic celebration dance every time he reached the end zone. This dance became a phenomenon, making it widely known as the "Prime Time Shuffle." It originated from an MC Hammer music video and instantly contributed to the development of Sanders's magnetic persona and the media coverage that surrounded him (Suggs, 2023). Journalists and commentators highlighted the entertainment aspect Sanders brought to football, as his celebrations added more excitement and personality to each game.

As Sanders's professional athletic career came to an end, his dual-sport success made him one of the most outstanding versatile athletes in history. On September 5, 1992, Sanders became the first professional athlete to score a touchdown in an NFL game and hit a home run in an MLB game (Bengel, 2022). He remains the only athlete to play in both the World Series and the Super Bowl. Once Sanders's playing days were over, he realized he needed to start a new chapter to keep his brand relevant. Sanders became an NFL Network Analyst, where he was on various shows throughout the professional football season, providing insights on each team and holding interviews with notable players. His charismatic commentary made his presence positively stand out, causing him to become a popular figure on sports television. However, in 2012, Sanders transitioned to coaching when he accepted a head football coach position at Prime Prep

Academy, a high school he co-founded in Texas. Sanders hopped around to a few more schools before becoming an offensive coordinator coach for Trinity Christian High School in Texas, where he helped coach his three sons, Deion Sanders Jr., Shilo Sanders, and Shedeur Sanders. Nevertheless, on September 21, 2020, Deion Sanders became the 21st head coach of the historically Black (HBCU) Jackson State University.

Coach Prime

Sanders claimed that following the tragic George Floyd incident, God called him to Jackson State to “change lives, change the perspective of HBCU football, make everyone step up to the plate and do what is right by these kids” (Fisher, 2023). Soon, Sanders became a symbol for the African American community as he helped break barriers by being an NCAA coach. *The Associated Press* reported in March 2022 that only 9% of head coaching positions in Division I college football were held by African Americans, while 89% of football coaches across the three divisions are white. Sanders’s main goal was to positively impact the community surrounding Jackson State and many other Black universities across the nation. His high-profile status as a former NFL player allowed him to compel talented recruitment prospects to play for the university. Consequently, the team’s on-field performance improved, causing them to receive more attention from fans and the media. This increased Jackson State’s campus culture as its school spirit was at an all-time high. The heightened profile of Jackson State’s football team also increased fundraising and donations from alumni and other university supporters (Newsome, 2022). These donations benefited the sports programs and other areas of the school, such as academics. Jackson State’s revenue grew from ticket sales, merchandise, and other game-related

activities. As a result, the university had more funding for academic-related aspects like new buildings.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Sanders announced on December 3, 2022, that he would depart from Jackson State University to become the new head football coach for the University of Colorado. As Sanders left HBCU division one football for the PAC-12, the attention and respect he brought to HBCU athletics reverted to the unsatisfying levels at which they sat prior to Sanders's arrival at Jackson State (Fisher, 2023). Just like he is currently doing for Colorado, Sanders sold a dream of making Jackson State and other Black universities more mainstream. However, he abandoned the dream he had built for JSU. This left many wondering if Sanders coached at JSU for a cause or because it was his best opportunity at the time for him and his son Shedeur to walk into a starting quarterback position. With his departure, JSU lost the famous “Prime Effect” because when Sanders left, the publicity for the JSU football program went as well. This left the HBCUs scrambling to find a different strategy for establishing national recognition and relevance. Sanders’s departure also impacted Jackson State’s football players. Many recruits went to Jackson State because Sanders gave them a promising future. However, once Sanders left, he brought some of these players to Colorado, and others began scrambling to quickly figure out their next steps to becoming well-known college athletes.

Deion Sanders’s Impact on CU Boulder and its Community

Only a week after the University of Colorado announced Deion Sanders as the new head football coach, the university generated 68,536 mentions in the media, according to data provided by Cision, Colorado’s media monitoring service. Cision estimated that Colorado made \$375 million in earned media, including TV viewership, radio, online, and print media. A year

earlier, CU Boulder only had 17,674 media mentions and an estimated ad equivalency of \$126 million (Schrotenboer, 2023). In my interview with Associate Director of Communications at the University of Colorado Curtis Snyder, he touched on this point by saying, “Coach Prime’s reach is so big, it outweighs anything CU Buffs football can do. He has so many people covering him, and he’s so transparent in the media, allowing others to see his positive impact on CU.” On the other hand, Sanders signed a five-year \$29.5 million contract with CU Boulder. Colorado Athletic Director Rick George stated that the school initially did not have enough money to pay Sanders. However, he knew they could make a return on investment with Sanders’s luminous presence. This statement held true 10 months later, as Sanders brought in an estimated \$280 million after four games (Schrotenboer, 2023). *USA Today Sports* states that this includes a \$20 million increase in football ticket sales from last year, an \$8 million increase in donations, a \$249 million increase in media exposure, and at least a \$3 million increase in other categories. Once the 2023 football season began, CU Boulder saw ticket sales increase exponentially as every game sold out. In addition, fan engagement has advanced as student sections were filled to their maximum capacity. This is a significant achievement compared to CU Boulder’s football season last year, as the student section decreased every game. Glancing at this from a public relations perspective, Sanders generated \$45,712 in earned media over a three-week period for CU Boulder (McCarthy, 2023). This indicates that Sanders rapidly advanced stakeholder, media, and influencer relations during the first three games. Earned media is crucial to a university since it has the power to impact policymakers, university administration, students, faculty, and the public (Sunshine, 2011). According to the *Daily Camera*, CU Boulder ran a report on the equivalent ad value of the media coverage since the season started and estimated it at \$90.55 million. These are

considerable aspects to focus on because they benefit the entire university since stakeholder donations are expected to increase, which can aid in supporting CU's academic programs.

As Colorado's media presence grows, it has positively impacted the entire campus since there has been increased student and community involvement. Many students have been eager to score jobs on the creative content team at the athletic department to witness and learn from the Prime media effect. In my interview with Snyder, he stated, "I used to get a couple of emails yearly about students wanting an internship in my department; now I'm getting a dozen a year. Students really want to be involved and a part of the Prime effect." Campus businesses like the CU student bookstore are booming (Meckles, 2023). They are selling tons of merchandise inspired by Coach Prime's catchphrases. Additionally, the city of Boulder generated \$17 million in revenue from the CU Buff's first home game (Rosa, 2023). Because ticket sales are in high demand, there is an even greater need for hotels, parking, food, etc. For instance, many local businesses have witnessed sustainable growth during the 2023 football season. Lucy Coe, CU graduate and assistant manager at Avanti, stated, "I have never seen a liquor order like what we had this week. This is new; this is so exciting for us. It's going to be good money. It's game-changing for us, for sure." Similarly, the Post Chicken and Beer restaurant emphasized that Sanders's presence has brought a remarkable change compared to last season. Director of Operations Harrison Ebert said, "We've got bigger crowds, bigger staffs, better promotions. We've also increased the amount [of products] we buy, which is fantastic for vendors."

Before CU Boulder's 2024 Spring semester began, the university announced they would add a course called "Prime Time: Public Performance and Leadership," a class that is designed to "help college athletes explore how to manage their time in college, prepare for a career, manage their celebrity, identify when best to speak into their profit center, advocate for worthy causes,

coordinate with sports agents, and how to interact with journalist's and the media" (Nivison, 2023). The class featured various speakers, and Sanders made multiple appearances. When he first visited the class, he took questions from students and told them the thought process behind his recruitment strategies. Sanders also stated that two of his players could be the first two players selected in next year's NFL draft (Schrotenboer, 2024). Lastly, he discussed football players receiving endorsement deals for their names, images, and likenesses (NIL). This course indicates that CU Boulder is actively integrating the "Prime Effect" into its curriculum. By naming a class after Sanders and inviting him to provide insights into marketing and leadership initiatives, the university is showing its commitment to utilizing his expertise in educating students.

Deion Sanders Brand

As Sanders increases Colorado's revenue and media presence, he hasn't forgotten about his own. When Sanders first arrived in Colorado, he partnered with Nike to create exclusive CU Buffs merchandise with "Prime" logos. Therefore, when this gear is sold at the CU Bookstore, both the university and Sanders receive a cut. This deal also requires Sanders to wear Nike-branded products while he is coaching. In addition, leading up to CU's rivalry game with Colorado State University, CSU's head coach Jay Norvell threw shade at Coach Prime, stating that he is disrespectful for not taking off his sunglasses when talking to the media. Norvell didn't know that his comment would help Sanders with business. Sanders and Blenders created a "Blenders x Coach Prime" sunglass line priced at \$67. Within a day, sales skyrocketed as their collaboration raked \$1.2 million in pre-orders (Ricciardi, 2023). This partnership ultimately increased the visibility of Sanders's personal brand as hundreds of news articles were written

about the popularity of the sunglasses and their origin story. Furthermore, Sanders and California Almonds launched an “Own Your Prime” campaign to bring awareness to the health benefits almonds have for recovering athletes. This advertisement airs on national and cable TV networks during commercial breaks for college football games. Moreover, Sanders has his most popular partnership with Kentucky Fried Chicken. Sanders and his family have filmed a series of commercials for KFC to promote their latest menu innovations. Sanders’s collaboration with KFC aligns with his brand image and values. He stated that he ate at KFC as a kid after his sports games and passed this tradition down to his own kids. Lastly, Sanders partnered with Aflac to promote the importance of choosing the right health insurance. Sanders, who has dealt with extensive medical issues himself, understands the financial challenges that come with inefficient health insurance. His Aflac partnership has been featured in advertisements and publicized at CU’s stadium. These various partnerships and endorsements highlight how Sanders makes his individual brand visible nationwide.

Besides endorsements, Sanders uses social media to build his brand. Examining Sanders’s Instagram, he has over 4 million followers and receives an average of 64,000 likes and 1,400 comments. He posts 20 times a week and has 16,140 weekly followers, resulting in his account having an 18.94% growth rate. Sanders has a consistent brand image on Instagram, as his feed has a black, gold, and white palette resembling CU Boulder’s school colors. His posts create engaging content, including behind-the-scenes glimpses of his life, highlights of his coaching career, motivational messages, and moments with his team and the Boulder community. Sanders uses Instagram to tell compelling stories about his life, the student-athletes, and the university's history. This allows him to create stronger connections with his followers, students, and alumni at CU Boulder. Sanders also frequently appears on a YouTube channel

called Well Off Media, which is a media company established and managed by his eldest son, Deion Sanders Jr. Well Off Media has 441,000 subscribers and posts videos every day of the week. These videos, which receive an average of 150,000 to 350,000 views, show Sanders behind-the-scenes coaching the Buffs and revamping their football program (Erwin, 2023). It is evident that Sanders's social media presence is enhancing the visibility of CU Boulder's football program. One Well Off Media video, "The Stars Are Arriving in Boulder Colorado for CU vs USC," highlights Sanders's influential impact on other powerful figures. In addition, social media provides an easy way for coaches to connect with prospective student-athletes. As Sanders builds excitement around Colorado's football team, he shares the program's vision and the team's hard work and achievements, which will capture a handful of potential recruits. *The Wall Street Journal* states, "Being associated with Sanders – be it appearing on the field or making cameos on Well Off Media – could literally line a player's pocket. This is an attractive reality to recruits" (Higgins, 2023). However, the university must remember that if Sanders departs to coach somewhere else, Well Off Media will leave with him, decreasing CU's coverage.

Sanders's well-known presence has brought many celebrities to CU Boulder's football games. To name a few, Lil Wayne, Offset, Shannon Sharpe, Michael Irvin, Terrell Owens, and The Rock have been in attendance for CU games this fall. These celebrity sightings have positively impacted CU's football program, contributing to its revamp and overall visibility. For instance, celebrities bring a significant following and media attention, which has generated more publicity and earned media for CU Boulder. They also have massive social media followings. Their posts about CU's football games have reached broad audiences, creating organic promotion and engagement on various social media platforms. Celebrities can also enhance recruiting appeal since this form of glamour at the university can be seen as attractive to potential

recruits. High-profile athletes and entertainers attending games have built excitement around the team, which could also influence recruits' perceptions of the program.

Similarly, the presence of these celebrities has increased fan attendance at the games. Folsom Field's maximum capacity is 50,183 people. For CU Boulder's rivalry game against Colorado State University, 54,972 fans showed up. Before CU's fall season began, *The Denver Post* reported that nearly 22% of CU's spring game tickets had been purchased by new customers who had never bought tickets from CU. Colorado also sold roughly 3,000 new season tickets this year (Williams, 2023). This emphasizes that Sanders's presence and entourage have brought new excitement and appeal to CU Boulder's campus. With *Fox Sports'* Big Noon Kickoff and *ESPN's* College Gameday holding events before games with notable athletes like Rob Gronkowski, this has created a unique buzz around CU Boulder's campus. The excitement generated by these celebrity appearances has encouraged fans to wake up at four in the morning to secure decent spots at these pre-game events. Lastly, celebrity affiliations with CU Boulder can potentially attract additional sponsors and donors to the school. Increased visibility and positive association with celebrities may encourage more local and national businesses to invest in the university.

Pete Carroll's Collegiate Legacy

Nevertheless, Deion Sanders is not the only person who has brought his athletic talent, significant media presence, and energetic personality to revamp a college football program. Pete Carroll was the head coach of the University of Southern California football program for almost 10 years. Carroll is widely recognized for his profound impact on the university as he revitalized the football program and the entire school. Like Deion Sanders, Carroll had famous charisma. He focused on developing strong and nurturing connections with his players, celebrating their

individuality. While his primary role at USC was related to athletics, his success with the football team indirectly affected the university's broader community, including academics. Carroll made a significant impact when he began implementing community engagement programs. He created non-profit organizations that prevented youth and gang violence surrounding the USC community (Hayes, 2016). Carroll included the Los Angeles Police Department, the L.A. County Sheriff, and the city's mayor to help this program succeed to its full potential. In addition, Carroll promoted an event that raised money to create a scholarship for students pursuing graduate study at the University of Southern California's School of Social Work (Branom, 2004). This indicates that Carroll felt strongly about students achieving academic success outside of athletics. As a result, he started a scholarship that allowed students to have the opportunity to afford an excellent academic program.

Furthermore, Pete Carroll had a similar swag to his brand as Sanders does. Carroll brought in many sports media outlets and invited celebrities like Will Farrell and Snoop Dogg to the games. According to Mark Bradley, Pete Carroll collaborated with local celebrities and sports analysts due to his robust online and community presence. At USC, these celebrities didn't just want to be around the Trojans; they wanted to join on the field. When USC was training for the Rose Bowl, Ferrell suited up and went through drills with the players. Similarly, Snoop Dogg ran routes at practice a year later for an MTV spot (Feldman, 2023). These celebrities helped promote USC's football program, which ultimately built excitement around the school, positively affecting USC's brand image. As a result, the enhancement of USC's reputation began attracting more students, faculty, and prospective recruits.

However, one of the most significant differences between the hype around the Buffaloes versus the Trojans is that Pete Carroll reignited something that had been inactive. Snoop Dogg

grew up to be a massive Trojans fan, living about 20 minutes from USC's stadium. On the other hand, Will Ferrell and many other celebrities had attended USC. They *were* Trojans (Feldman, 2023). With the Buffs, the celebrities have flocked to Boulder for Sanders and Sanders only. Notable sports journalist and personality Stephen A. Smith hasn't paid attention to CU's football program for the past decade. Sanders has impressively leveraged CU's popularity through social media this past year. Although, since Carroll coached USC pre-social media, his coverage was organic and something that can never be replicated.

After almost a decade of coaching USC's football program, Carroll left to coach for the NFL. USC's football program was declining as the talent pool began decreasing. Loss after loss, a handful of USC's most promising commits abandoned the program to play at other schools that had more potential (Ferreira, 2023). With the increased visibility, the Buffaloes may seem on top of the world right now; however, once the shine wears off and Sanders goes onto the next best opportunity, where will this leave them? This is where sports communication plays a vital role in the world of college football.

The Dynamics of Communication in College Athletics

Sports communication offers several strategies and tactics that help maintain visibility, engage audiences, and enhance the overall perception of college football programs. Sports communication serves as the bridge that connects teams, athletes, and fans. College football games are more than sporting events; they unite communities such as alumni and students, and sports communication helps link these diverse groups together. Sports communication comes in a variety of forms, from the electrifying commentary of play-by-play announcers to the real-time updates on social media. Beyond traditional broadcasting, social media platforms have become a

convenient way of posting press conferences and interviews, enabling teams and individual athletes to engage with their fan base, share their stories, and provide insights into their athletic journey. Social media is an essential element of sports communication because people no longer have the time or patience for large bites; they want small bites, such as highlights from a game (Watson, 2009). Social media provides a dynamic platform for efficient storytelling and engagement, emphasizing the excitement that college sports bring to a community.

At the beginning of Colorado's 2023 fall season, the football team shocked many people nationwide as they beat teams they were expected to lose to. However, their winning streak was over toward the end of their season, and they were back to losing every game. Simultaneously, the media presence never went away. Because Sanders raised a significant media presence around his first season at CU, he grew a dedicated fan base. Even though the football team began showing poor performances, the loyal following remained as people were interested in updates, analysis, and team coverage. Many were hopeful for a potential turnaround, wondering if Sanders could implement any strategies that may aid in the team making a comeback. This kind of scrutiny around coaching ability contributes to the media's ongoing discussions surrounding CU's football program. Ultimately, the story Sanders has sold of rebuilding CU's football program – one that has faced many challenges – has been compelling for fans and sports analysts.

The Flutie and Prime Effect

Consequently, sports public relations have a significant impact on the entire university. A successful sports program can attract prospective students who want a vibrant college experience. Doug J. Chung, a marketing professor at the University of Texas at Austin, states

that this is known as the “Flutie Effect,” a phenomenon named after former College Football Hall of Famer and NFL player Doug Flutie. His stellar performance while playing football for Boston College increased the school’s popularity and boosted the number of applications by 30%. Chung's findings highlight that applications increase by 17.7% when a mediocre team improves their athletic performance. Universities that want to attain similar results without a high-equipped team must lower their tuition by 3.8% (IvyWise, 2023). Texas Christian University reported that gaining nationwide attention through its successful athletic program increased its admissions. When TCU won the Rose Bowl in 2011, it gained over 5,000 more applicants than the previous year. According to data provided by TCU admissions, in the fall of 2010, 14,079 first-year students applied, while the fall of 2011 had 19,166 applicants (Kitchin, 2016). This research highlights that a thriving sports culture on college campuses can positively impact enrollment numbers, contributing to the overall growth of the university. Therefore, it’s crucial for universities to implement public relations tactics to help garner media exposure not only during the games but also in the off-season and through well-planned strategic campaigns. This exposure can extend beyond sports, highlighting the university's strengths in different academic areas.

Like the “Flutie Effect,” CU Boulder has witnessed the “Prime Effect.” During the 2023 football season, Sanders helped make a positive economic impact as Colorado home games boosted the local economy by \$113.2 million. Each home game was estimated to generate \$16.7 million to \$21.6 million (Jarpe, 2023). In March 2024, it was reported that there was a 20% increase in applications for CU Boulder’s 2024 incoming freshman class, totaling more than 68,000 prospective students. These numbers were record-setting for the university (Young,

2024). Furthermore, there was a 41% rise in transfer applications, highlighting the desire among students to join the “Prime Effect” at CU Boulder.

While CU Boulder is thrilled with people's expressed interest in the school, recruiters have stated that prospective students constantly ask, "How can I meet Coach Prime?" This shows that many prospective students are interested in the high-profile figure himself, possibly more than the academic areas the school provides. Additionally, CU Boulder states that students from all 50 states and 97 countries have been applying to become Buffs (Krause, 2023). The university reports that international applications are up 38% from last year, highlighting the global reach Sanders’s presence has had. According to Snyder, “Athletics is a big part of the student experience on campus. When outsiders see CU Boulder students having fun at football games, they want to be a part of that.” Prospective, transfer, and international students find it much harder to find negative aspects at CU Boulder when they see positive fan engagement. The increased media coverage for CU Boulder's football games has enhanced the university's visibility overall. This visibility has attracted prospective students as our football team has contributed to a sense of new pride and identity among students this year. The increased campus culture and spirit appeal to prospective students seeking a vibrant and engaged campus community.

The “Prime Effect” has created a significant increase in CU Boulder’s diversity as admissions have seen a broad increase from almost all ethnic groups. CU Boulder’s current student body is 2.7% Black. *The Daily Camera* reported that 50.5% of the increase in CU Boulder’s 2024 freshman applications came from Black students (Young, 2024). This is an incredible increase in diversity as it has many positive impacts on individual students and the institution. For instance, exposure to diverse perspectives and backgrounds enhances the

educational experience for all students. It encourages critical thinking, challenges assumptions, and promotes a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues (Modi, 2023). It's vital that students are exposed to diversity at a young age because they need to be prepared to work and interact with people from diverse backgrounds post-college. CU Boulder also takes strong measures to implement diversity, inclusivity, and equity around campus. The university created the Inclusion, Diversity, and Excellence in Academics (IDEA) Plan to serve as the campus's blueprint for an inclusive experience among all students. The plan provides concrete recommendations for achieving diversity goals and actions to ensure an immediate and positive impact on inclusive excellence and campus climate. The IDEA Plan highlights how CU Boulder fosters an environment of inclusivity and equity. This conveys a message that individuals of all races, ethnicities, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and other identities are valued and respected, emphasizing a sense of belonging for everyone.

Collegiate Public Relations Initiatives

Today, the evolution of technology has challenged how public relations is practiced. As Robert J. Key (2005) explains, "Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age" (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Sports organizations cannot have major success for a prolonged period without public support. Public relations plays a major role in this aspect as it shines a spotlight on the sport, resulting in media representation, events, and community support. Sports public relations can sculpt reputations, influence public opinion, shape values, and connect brands with the strategies they use and the stories they tell (Sideman, 2023). According to Wesley Mallette, Interim Director of

Collegiate Athletics at the University of California, Riverside, having and executing a strategic communications strategy will help build, shape, or change a university's brand narrative. This helps universities navigate challenging times and build strong relationships with key stakeholders and fans. Maintaining a strong media presence is vital for a university's representation and reducing the ability for its brand narrative to be negatively impacted by other factors. When conducting a literature review, it is essential to identify several public relations categories that can be used in collegiate sports to help draw attention to the overall university (Kotler & Keller, 2008):

- a. Publications – articles, blogs, and newsletters distributed by the university.
- b. Stakeholder Relationships – engagement with prospective students and graduate students to help them feel a part of their alma mater.
- c. Partnerships – partnering with local businesses as well as high-profile brands.
- d. Media Relations – press conferences and social media content.
- e. Influencer Engagement – exclusive access to events and collaborations with celebrities and brands on content creation.

Publications are crucial in collegiate sports because they inform the public about achievements like reaching athletic milestones. CU Boulder distributes multiple monthly newsletters emphasizing game scores and upcoming campus events. This is distributed to students, faculty, and alumni. This is also an efficient way for the university to engage with other stakeholders, like alumni who frequently donate, to help them feel more connected to their alma mater. However, placing more emphasis on academic achievements than athletics in these publications can help reinforce how much CU Boulder values its academics.

Creating strategic partnerships in collegiate sports can significantly enhance the visibility of a university. Community partnerships are critical as they highlight how a university wants to positively impact the community around it. Suppose CU Boulder's athletics focused on partnering with more student and local organizations. In that case, this will show the public that the university doesn't pour all its time and money into the athletic department and that the primary focus at CU Boulder is its educational benefits.

Media relations are a vital element in collegiate sports, as press conferences and social media content help inform the public about the athletic status of the school. During my interview with Snyder, he expressed that, "Athletics is the front porch of many universities. It's people's first impression of the school," which allows sports to act as a publicity piece when trying to enhance other aspects of a university. If CU Boulder can use media relations to highlight academic areas, it would show prospective students that this is a well-rounded university that offers an excellent college experience. Similarly, the athletic department considers influencer engagement important as it enables collaborations with specific brands and facilitates organizing events to raise awareness of its various sports. However, CU Boulder must work on engaging more with academic organizations and brands that strive to help students succeed in their schoolwork. Snyder highlighted, "The Athletic Department is working more with campus than they ever had. At the end of the day, each athlete is also a student, and we understand they must be students first. They have more academic standards than most of the student body knows." By emphasizing the student-athlete component to the public, CU Boulder can enhance its reputation for academics, ultimately attracting more prospective students and increasing parental willingness to enroll them at the university.

Social Media Assessment

A brief social media audit of social media from CU Boulder, CU Boulder Football, and Deion Sanders Instagram revealed the following:

Table 1 – University of Colorado Instagram Audit

Followers	Average Likes	Average Comments	Followers Growth Rate	Weekly Engagement Rate
166,592	5,240	20	7.24%	3.21%

Table 2 - University of Colorado Football Instagram Audit

Followers	Average Likes	Average Comments	Followers Growth Rate	Weekly Engagement Rate
1.2 million	186	16,386	94.02%	1.42%

Table 3 – Deion Sanders Instagram Audit

Followers	Average Likes	Average Comments	Followers Growth Rate	Weekly Engagement Rate
4.8 million	64,502	1,453	18.94%	1.40%

Table 1 highlights CU Boulder’s Instagram stats. With 163,592 followers, the university’s Instagram has a consistent presence. A robust social media presence is vital for a

university as it helps increase its visibility. The university can enhance its reputation among a broader audience, such as prospective students, by highlighting academic achievements, research breakthroughs, and other academic elements. Instagram also provides a platform to highlight the expertise of faculty members, giving prospective students a glimpse of who will be educating them throughout their four years. Sharing faculty members' research, publications, and other contributions allows the university to create a positive association between academic excellence and the institution. Lastly, social media allows a university to engage with the community around it. A solid social media presence fosters a sense of community among students, faculty, alumni, and other supporters. As a result, this can lead to a shared commitment to academic excellence and contribute to an environment where learning and achievements are celebrated.

Contrastingly, Table 2 highlights CU Boulder's Instagram page for football. CU Buffs Football has a robust social media presence with over a million followers. This coverage helps increase the football program's visibility and attract the attention of potential recruits who follow for updates on games and campus life. Having a variety of talented recruits to choose from is vital to maintaining a successful football program and strong community engagement. Instagram also provides a platform for college football programs to connect with their fan base, including current and prospective students and alumni. Sharing updates, game highlights, and behind-the-scenes content creates a sense of community and loyalty within CU Boulder. CU Buffs Football highlights unique traditions and game-day experiences. They post Instagram stories of Ralphie, the school's live buffalo mascot, running on the field at halftime. This helps build CU Boulder's brand identity and attract prospective students who identify with the values the school has to offer. It also allows alumni and the local community to feel connected to the university. For example, when Sanders first came to Colorado, CU Buffs Football posted about his interactions

with local businesses, showcasing him trying different restaurants and rating their food. This series allowed Sanders to introduce himself to the community and enhance the football program's relationship with its local supporters.

Collaboration between the university's Instagram and football pages is a powerful strategy to highlight academic excellence. Emphasizing the academic achievements and contributions of student-athletes, coaches, and the broader university community creates a narrative that shows the success of individuals at the college. The university and football page can create joint content in the off-season, including football players attending lectures and engaging with academic departments in unique ways. This behind-the-scenes content shows how the athletes take their academics seriously and encourage other students to do the same. Both pages can also feature student-athletes' profiles, highlighting their academic accomplishments, achievements in sports, and community involvement. The football players can have Instagram takeovers on CU Boulder's page, where they showcase a day in their life, balancing academic responsibilities with their commitment to football. This humanizes the athletes and demonstrates their commitment to both academics and athletics. To further promote academic excellence during the football games, the university can hold academic achievement ceremonies during commercial breaks for students who excel in specific areas of their education. The university can also highlight tutoring services, academic advising, and study resources to inform students about available academic support. This will highlight the importance of CU Boulder's education to students and encourage them to do well in various academic areas.

Because Sanders has a high-profile social media presence, as shown in Table 3, he can help promote CU Boulder's academics on their Instagram. Sanders posts daily motivational quotes that inspire his 4 million followers to always put their best foot forward and live every

day to their fullest. Therefore, Sanders can take over CU Boulder's Instagram and target these positive posts at students to encourage them to put time and dedication into their academic studies. Since his brand currently revolves around being CU Boulder's head football coach, he can regularly feature player spotlights on his own Instagram that highlight their academic accomplishments. For instance, sharing stories, photos, or videos celebrating players with academic honors and achievements, such as earning Dean's List recognition, will show others the dedication and hard work players put into their studies. Sanders can also highlight players' study habits and time management strategies, which many students struggle with. As a result, Sanders can emphasize our universities extensive resources that are available on campus. This will help create awareness among players and students about CU's support system for academic success.

Additionally, Sanders can participate in educational initiatives by collaborating with academic departments and engaging in events that promote academic excellence. Every semester, he can post a story on his Instagram highlighting each student with the highest GPA in their department. This will encourage other students to do their best each semester so they can secure a feature on his page. Lastly, Sanders can leverage his motivational social media presence during midterm and final periods by posting encouraging messages that help students power through their work and strive for a successful outcome. Having Sanders take over CU Boulder's Instagram account to promote the university's academics will contribute to a campus culture that values both athletic and academic success. This will enhance the football program's overall image and reinforce the importance of education for all students.

“Be Boulder” Campaign

CU Boulder's most recent academic initiative was the "Be Boulder" campaign, which aimed to communicate and promote the unique qualities of the college, emphasizing its values of innovation, diversity, and academic excellence that define the CU Boulder experience. CU Boulder wanted to stray away from its party school image, so this campaign aimed to highlight the achievements of students and faculty across different academic areas. The campaign also emphasizes the university's commitment to academic excellence, including all the research and technology they fund to implement forward-thinking educational approaches.

Through marketing approaches like billboards, videos, posters, and more, CU Boulder showed its campus's diverse and inclusive community. They showed how important these values are to the school, as diversity plays a vital role in the educational experience. These marketing efforts also offered a glimpse into the vibrant campus culture, including sporting events and extracurricular activities. Additionally, the "Be Boulder" videos that were posted on social media showed the gorgeous natural surroundings of the college, emphasizing the connection between the campus and the beautiful environment surrounding it. These videos also highlighted the university's involvement in its local community, showcasing outreach services and partnerships. CU Boulder showcased this academic campaign globally by putting the slogan on magazines, buses, t-shirts, bumper stickers, bags, and even cabs in New York City. This allowed the campaign to have a global outreach, portraying the university's academic excellence to prospective students and their parents. This shows them that CU Boulder is more than just a party school; it's a place where you can achieve your educational goals and expand your knowledge, setting you up for a successful future.

Creative Project Overview

With the extensive press that Sanders brings to CU Boulder, this is the perfect time for the university to leverage this coverage into a public relations campaign centered around academic excellence. The media focuses on how the university works with Sanders to revamp its football program, which may allow the college to become known as a “football school.” However, CU Boulder must leverage Sanders’s high-profile media presence and influence to highlight the university’s robust academic areas. Strategically integrating Sanders's brand with CU Boulder's identity will ensure his name positively impacts all areas of the school, even in the event of his departure. A public relations campaign that emphasizes CU Boulder’s academic excellence is essential as it will create a more holistic and compelling narrative about the university. It maximizes the impact of the recent media coverage, attracting a broader audience and reinforcing the idea that the institution excels not only in sports but also in providing a top-notch education.

Through my creative project, I defined specific objectives, strategies, and tactics to improve CU Boulder’s brand perception, increase student engagement, and enhance the university’s reputation. With this plan, CU Boulder will reach a diverse audience, including sports enthusiasts, prospective students, parents, alumni, and the overall academic community. The campaign will target these audiences through effective communication channels such as CU Boulder’s social media platforms and email list. The campaign explores potential partnerships with CU Boulder’s campus resources, allowing Sanders to enhance the university’s academic reputation. Moreover, this PR campaign also creates messages that align Sanders’s influence with CU Boulder’s values. Integrating these two aspects is vital since Sanders will not stay at CU Boulder forever. Therefore, this ensures that when he leaves in the future, his positive impacts on the university won’t vanish as well.

Furthermore, the university must monitor the campaign's performance and success. Through social media analytics and audience feedback, CU Boulder will track if they are meeting the intended goals of the campaign. Ultimately, this public relations campaign implements an efficient plan where CU Boulder can take every positive impact Sanders has made on the university and leverage this toward intellectual areas. By seamlessly integrating Sanders's brand with CU Boulder's academic capabilities, this public relations campaign not only celebrates the excellence of our football program but also shows the university's commitment to fostering a culture of success that extends beyond sports. This will prepare well-rounded students for triumphs both on campus and in their future endeavors.

Contribution

The contribution of this public relations campaign is to enhance CU Boulder's reputation and visibility. Emphasizing the institution's commitment to excellence in multiple areas shows the school values athletic excellence and academic achievement. As a result, this creates a balanced representation of the university's offerings, creating a positive image of CU Boulder.

The campaign will help attract prospective students seeking a college that values different aspects of student life. It's important to know that you are applying and attending a college with a lively campus culture that likes to have fun but also strongly cares about succeeding in educational areas. This progressive brand image of CU Boulder may help increase enrollment and improve student retention rates. It may also attract a more diverse audience of prospective students and parents. Similarly, the campaign will help attract talented faculty and staff who appreciate an environment that values a holistic approach to success in athletic and intellectual areas. Lastly, a successful campaign can strengthen the connection between CU Boulder and its

alumni. Alumni who are proud of the university's athletic and academic achievements are more likely to be engaged and supportive, contributing to an increase in donations that CU Boulder can use towards furthering academic excellence.

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