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Athletics may be influencing institutional rankings—or it may not be.

Athletics Success and Institutional Rankings

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Whether intercollegiate athletics influence outside perceptions of institutional reputation and educational quality—and whether this translates into improvements in recruiting students and donors—is disputed in the research literature (Brooker and Klastorin, 1981; Gaski and Etzel, 1984; Grimes and Chressanthis, 1994; McCormick and Tinsley, 1990; Murphy and Trandel, 1994; Toma and Cross, 1998). Researchers have typically attempted to correlate success on the field or court with variables such as applications, yield, standardized test scores, out-of-state applications, and alumni donations, arriving at a mixed set of conclusions. It is clearer that spectator sports—those athletic endeavors that attract broad external interest—can be potential revenue sources in certain circumstances (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). Clearer still is that athletics can make institutions more accessible to outsiders (and even future insiders), serving as a sort of “front porch” (Shulman and Bowen, 2002; Frans, 2002). Spectator sports often serve to introduce the university to a national audience and keep them before local ones, providing “free” advertising to prospective students and donors. As such, athletics can be a tool in strengthening perceptions of institutional quality, as measured in the popular rankings, but also as considered by funders, both public and private.

Admissions and fundraising numbers are important in determining institutional prestige, and spectator sports may well influence an increase in both

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the quantity and the quality of applications and the number and size of donations, especially from alumni. Mostly, athletics give universities an often powerful opportunity to reach those who might not have otherwise remembered or considered the institution. Also, there can be a halo effect, where success in sports can lead to perceptions by external constituents that an institution is exemplary more broadly, including in its student life and even in its academic program, although such connections are likely tenuous at best (Toma, 2003). Even if mistaken, these perceptions likely matter to institutions. Students interested in a college experience that is rich in social activities may be attracted to an institution with prominent and successful athletics. These same institutions that offer spectator sports are also likely to have extensive Greek life programs and active nightlife off-campus. Osborne (2004) writes: "It seems reasonable that, all things being equal, students prefer their schools to win rather than lose, and yet it may be that the 'consumption capital' from attendance at games and creation of lifetime memories is the biggest attraction of major athletics for students. Many students may see athletics as an essential part of the college experience," (p. 56).

These students eventually become alumni who continue to value the kinds of social engagement that accompanies spectator sports. Sandy and Sloane (2004) actually suggest that more accomplished students prefer institutions that have high-profile college athletics over universities that do not. Perhaps uniquely, sports unite otherwise disconnected communities (Dunning, 1999), including those associated with colleges and universities, even while taking on the status of a quasi-religion (Mandelbaum, 2004). Dunning (1999) elaborates: "Identification with a sports team can provide people with an important identity prop, a source of 'we-feelings' and a sense of belonging in what would otherwise be an isolated experience" (p. 32). A successful athletics program is not simply about direct revenue, but also about indirect benefits.

Do these extend to increased academic prestige, as measured in the rankings? The common notion in higher education is that everything is easier when an institution is recognized. It can recruit more accomplished students and more noteworthy faculty, which only cause its prestige to further increase. Similarly, it can attract more resources through fundraising, and perhaps even research and appropriations. Whether these are real outcomes or simply perceived, senior administrators tend to believe them to be true. Frey (1982) suggests three reasons university presidents support athletics: (1) belief that winning programs attract students, financial contributions, and favorable legislative appropriations; (2) college football is the only element at an institution powerful enough to unite all of its diverse constituencies; and (3) recognition of the national exposure athletics can bring to universities (and to themselves as leaders). These are just the kinds of variables that influence the rankings favorably: applications, acceptance and yield rates, test scores, alumni giving, endowment, national profile, and so on. If athletics are the front porch to the university, then does it increase the "curb appeal" and thus influence its rankings?

In exploring whether athletic success has a positive influence on institutional rankings, I begin by briefly discussing the empirical research on spikes in admissions applications and charitable donations following success in athletics—the “Flutie Effect.” I then consider the rankings, most prominently those in *U.S. News and World Report* (USNWR). Finally, I connect athletics and rankings, suggesting the possibilities for success on the football field or basketball court to enhance rankings.

The “Flutie Effect”

Several of the chapters in this volume reference the studies that consider whether success on the field or court translates into more applications from prospective students (Allen and Peters, 1982; Chressanthis and Grimes, 1993; Chu, 1989; Frank, 2004; Murphy and Trandel, 1994; Toma and Cross, 1998; Zimbalist, 1999) or higher standardized scores of incoming students (Bremmer and Kesselring, 1993; McCormick and Tinsley, 1990; Mixon, 1995; Tucker and Amato, 1993). There is a similar literature on winning and fundraising (Baade and Sundberg, 1996; Brooker and Klastorin, 1981; Gaski and Etzel, 1984). These studies are inconclusive of the residual benefits of spectator sports for institutions. Many studies did find a positive relationship, but it is often of modest importance. In fact, in his analysis of the literature here, Frank (2004) concludes that institutions overspend on athletics to reap very few benefits for what they invest. In other words, given what athletics programs cost, institutions could realize gains in admissions and fundraising through more economic means than “buying” them through spectator sports.

Sperber (2000) describes the “Flutie Effect,” which followed the classic Thanksgiving weekend 1984 football win by Boston College over the University of Miami on a last-second touchdown pass by quarterback Doug Flutie. Millions of viewers saw the play, either during the game or as part of highlight packages. The next fall semester, Boston College experienced a 25 percent increase in its applications. The institution was not particularly prominent in college football—at least not like a Notre Dame, Texas, or Southern California—but the new cable television network, ESPN, specialized in its early years in broadcasting games involving teams with more modest profiles. Sperber notes that when Boston College was later less successful in football, its applications declined. But it continued to receive more applications than it did before the 1984 Miami game.

Similar spikes have occurred in other situations, often when a previously overlooked or underperforming school enjoys unanticipated success. Toma (2003) and Ehrenberg (2000) reference the surprising 1995 Rose Bowl appearance by Northwestern, which came after decades of the team being at the bottom of the Big Ten. The following year, Northwestern rose to ninth in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, an increase from thirteenth—a significant jump, considering how difficult it is to move at the very top of the rankings. Toma also notes the hiring by South Carolina of

former Notre Dame coach Lou Holtz, and the subsequent bowl appearances for the traditional “also-ran.” Zimbalist (1999) discusses the emergence of the University of Massachusetts basketball program in the mid-1990s, following a Final Four appearance; the NCAA basketball tournament “Sweet Sixteen” run by previously unknown George Washington in 1993; and a similar run by the College of Charleston in 1997. Sigelman and Carter (1979) note that Ohio State in 1966, Missouri in 1960, and Virginia Tech in 1973 saw increases in alumni giving after successful football seasons.

Toma and Cross (1998) compare the thirty institutions that won national championships in football and men’s basketball between 1979 and 1992 with a set of peer institutions to see if an increase in admissions applications accompanies athletics success. They found that under most circumstances notable increases occurred in admissions applications received, both in absolute terms and also relative to peer schools, in the year of and over the three years following the championship season. For instance, of the sixteen schools that won or shared championships in college football, fourteen showed some increase in the number of applications received for the first freshman class following the championship, seven enjoyed an increase of 10 percent or more, and two schools had an increase of 20 percent or more. Over three years, fourteen of sixteen championship institutions showed an increase in applications, and thirteen of these fourteen schools experienced an increase of 7 percent or more. For most institutions, their peers lagged well behind. Toma and Cross found that the increases were most pronounced at selective institutions; when the championships were a compelling story, as with a breakout season; and when related to football as opposed to basketball.

Toma and Cross stipulate that changes in admissions numbers at any institution can be attributed to countless factors. Also, isolating athletics success within these many variables is probably impossible. How much of the “Flutie Effect” was attributable to Boston College simply having positioned itself, athletically and academically, to be a “hot” institution? Even looking at athletics success may be questionable, because significant notice and positive publicity can come from sources other than championships, such as simply appearing in a memorable televised game, participating in the NCAA tournament or a major bowl game, hiring a recognized coach, or even breaking out to have a modestly successful season after years of ineptitude. Furthermore, does the “Flutie Effect” really change a university? Toma and Cross looked at application totals, but not their quality. Does a decrease in the acceptance rate and increase in yield rate and standardized test score averages accompany receiving more applications? Does the alumni giving rate increase? How about influences, as I am asking here, on *USNWR* ranking?

Rankings

College rankings date back to the nineteenth century, and even the federal government has ranked universities at various points in our history (Meredith,

2004). Rankings have never been more prominent. *USNWR* sells 3.5 million copies of its rankings issue, generating annual revenues of \$5.2 million (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez, 1998), and other national publications such as *Kiplinger* and *Money* have entered the annual rankings market, offering their own twist. Their influence on prospective students has led institutions to focus on increasing their standing in the rankings and thus, they believe, their competitive position in attracting the most desirable students. Institutions have found that they can influence their place in the rankings. *USNWR*, for instance, along with reputation among peers also includes factors such as admissions selectivity, alumni giving rate, and retention and graduate rates—variables institutions can manipulate to show better in the rankings. Ehrenberg (2000) describes how Cornell University changed reporting habits with alumni data to improve its *USNWR* college rankings. Rankings considerations can also influence pricing decisions by universities and colleges (Machung, 1998; Monks and Ehrenberg, 1999). Institutions may also present misleading or inaccurate data, sometimes purposefully (Carmody, 1987; Hunter, 1995). Stecklow (1995) goes as far as asserting that some universities have even fabricated test scores and acceptance data in hopes of improving their ranking.

Such approaches are not without their critics, who attribute factors such as increasing tuition costs to institutions playing the rankings game (Eide, Brewer, and Ehrenberg, 1998; Hossler and Foley, 1995; Litten and Hall, 1989) or who simply contend that they do not—and cannot—represent academic quality (McGuire, 1995; Schmitz, 1993). Also, *USNWR* ranks all institutions that are somewhat selective, assigning them into several categories. The magazine thus promotes additional incentives for universities and colleges to focus on the rankings, as institutions perceive they can move closer to the top of their specific group even if they will never be highly ranked among all institutions. Another set of criticisms is by public institutions arguing that rankings criteria tend to favor private institutions, such as faculty salaries, student-faculty ratio, and giving rate. Casper (1996), the former Stanford University president, suggests that *USNWR* manipulates its method to encourage movement in the rankings every year in an attempt to increase sales (Gottlieb, 1999). Despite such criticisms, rankings continue to be influential, especially in providing initial (and subsequent) reference points for prospective students. Accordingly, institutions incorporate rankings into their promotional and marketing efforts, with few seemingly able to choose to opt out of doing so.

Spectator Sports and Institutional Rankings

Universities and colleges continue to invest in athletics, seeking the indirect benefits in connecting with external constituents that take an active interest in teams and games. But research is inconclusive about the tangible residual benefits that spectator sports can have for an institution, and even

those that suggest an impact note that it is likely modest. In my own work, I focus on a new variable, asking whether athletics success correlates with an improved *USNWR* ranking. I find very little connection between year-to-year changes in winning and the ranking *USNWR* assigns an institution the following year. Rankings, of course, change only modestly from year to year, with institutions typically moving only a couple of slots, at most. But there is some relationship between where institutions rank and whether they compete in athletics and how much they win. For instance, among private institutions, which tend to dominate the upper reaches of the rankings, those with Division I football programs did better in the rankings over time. But there is not a “Flutie Effect” in relation to the rankings, with those institutions that are enjoying a national championship in a spectator sport, for instance, not consistently seeing a subsequent increase in their rankings. Sometimes there were modest increases, but there were also declines, with no compelling example of an institution moving far ahead following athletics success.

Perhaps Frank (2004) is correct in his contention that institutional investments in athletics yield few benefits, even indirectly. However, Gaski and Etzel (1984) could also be correct, having concluded that athletic success might yield a cumulative effect seen only over a long period of time. It may also be that the universities and colleges that experience success in spectator sports are already so known that the publicity and other benefits that accrue from winning a championship are unlikely to have much of an effect in such areas as their ranking. Where a “Flutie Effect” is more likely is where there is a particularly compelling story, like the Northwestern Rose Bowl team in 1995, or a less nationally known institution such as George Mason University making the Final Four in 2006 or Boise State University winning the Fiesta Bowl in 2007. These athletics accomplishments may well cause additional prospective students to consider the institution or may motivate their alumni to increase giving—both drivers of upward mobility in the rankings. Also, those filling out peer evaluations of academic reputation for *USNWR* might be more likely to list them, even though the athletics success has nothing to do with the academic caliber of the institution. Nevertheless, the “Flutie Effect,” if it exists, is unpredictable, something institutions should consider in making the decision to invest in upgrading athletics.

Furthermore, athletics may be more important for leading public institutions than for private ones. Among the sixty-three leading private universities in the *USNWR* rankings, thirty do not participate in Division I football and were not invited to a Division I postseason basketball tournament between 1999 and 2007. Only thirteen public universities out of sixty-six were not in either of these categories. Private institutions may simply be more established, needing athletics less to reach prominence, as reflected in the rankings.

Concluding Thoughts

The debate about whether athletic success can influence areas such as rankings will go on, and empirical research on the topic will continue to be challenging, especially when designing studies that properly isolate athletics as a variable. Those studies that indicate no real impact from athletics are less persuasive to senior administrators than their own instinct that spectator sports in particular have significant utility in enhancing external affairs and building campus community. They buy the notion that athletics is the front porch to the university. Athletics is embedded in our national culture and has become institutionalized at universities and colleges—a powerful combination. Notwithstanding the challenges associated with athletics, including their expense, it is difficult to envision even minor changes to the status of athletics at so many of our leading institutions. It is important to consider the impact of spectator sports on realizing institutional ambitions, and being more highly ranked among them. The same is true of the rankings; they may be unsatisfying in many respects, but they are also influential, both among prospective students and in the strategies that institutions craft.

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