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## Sociologists offer explanations for the link between football and American universities

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DENVER -- When a Stanford University scholar displayed the first slide in his presentation on college football and university status systems, an audience member who was a loyal Cardinal fan challenged him. Why, she asked, would a Stanford professor lead off with a slide showing the football stadium of the University of California at Berkeley?

The comment was a joke. But it was a perfect illustration of one part of the paper presented here at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association -- namely, that in the United States, a major part of the identity of American colleges and universities is linked to athletics and, specifically, to football. But the paper argues that traditional explanations for why American universities are so football-obsessed are wrong. Further, the paper offers evidence that universities that join top athletic conferences not only improve their sports programs, but may see academic improvements as a result.

Mitchell Stevens, an associate professor of education at Stanford University, argued in presenting the paper that only a better understanding of football's role in American higher education -- and its role in signifying status -- will allow for an understanding of the sport's role. (His co-authors are Arik Lifschitz, associate provost of the University of the People, and Michael Sauder, associate professor of sociology at the University of Iowa.)

The traditional explanations for why American higher education values football are flawed, Stevens said. Many say, for example,

that football is the path to school spirit and good feeling -- a theory he said was debunked by recent scandals. Others have assumed football makes money, which isn't necessarily true, he noted. Still others have argued that football attracts general support for universities from a public that may not like certain aspects of higher education, Stevens said. "It enables people who don't support, say, gender and sexuality studies at a university to still support the university," is the way the argument goes, he said. Of course many universities with die-hard football fans have been unable to use that support to prevent major budget cuts (especially from states) in recent years.

So why did American universities -- unlike their European counterparts -- make football so central to their identities?

The paper argues that there are three reasons:

- Intercollegiate football (which took off in the late 19th century) is "a system for marking and distributing status" among universities in the United States. Stevens compared athletic conferences, from their start, to junior high school cafeterias. "You are as cool as the people you have lunch with."
- Status derived from football and conferences "is consequential beyond the athletic domain."
- Status "is multiple," and not a singular ranking. So interplay between athletics and academic prestige, while related, may not be identical.

Specific facets of the development of American higher education have contributed to the significance of football, Stevens said. The United States never had a federal system of higher education, and regulation was minimal in the 18th and 19th centuries. As a result, American higher education was highly diverse and disorganized -- and not necessarily respected by much of the public.

"American higher education was competitive, ambitious, effete and anarchic," he said. And the United States as a society was also facing, around the time football was taking off, "a crisis of masculinity" as the closing of the American West removed one challenge for men. It's not surprising, Stevens said, that camping movements and the idea of men spending time in rustic lodges took off at the same time as football.

When Harvard University presidents spoke with pride of teaching "manly sports," they were asserting the place of an elite university (a football-playing university early as the sport spread) in American society.

Turning from history and sociology to anthropology, the paper then invokes the work of the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his study of Balinese cockfights. Geertz noted that there was an elaborate hierarchy in cockfighting, with the most attention paid to competition involving matches between "near status equals," and between "high status owners."

"Geertz emphasizes that the driving force behind this effort is the status of the owners, not the quality or performance of the cocks they own," the paper says.

“Similarly, colleges and universities have created elaborate formal systems for determining which schools will compete with which others,” the paper says. “As with the Balinese cockfights, the determination of appropriate competitors is not based solely on athletic performance. Rather, it is simultaneously a technical and status-symbolic endeavor. Football games are markers of status in that a school’s rivals publicly indicate its peers or worthy adversaries and symbolize its claims to a certain national prominence.”

Since much of the organization of college football revolves around conferences, the paper then turns to them -- and takes more of a quantitative approach, examining the stability of conferences (from 1896 to 2010), the quality of football programs over time (as judged by *USA Today*), and the prestige of universities, as determined by the peer evaluations used by *U.S. News & Report* for its rankings.

Of conferences that have been around for decades, by far the most stable conference (no new members, no exits, from its launch) is the Ivy League, the most prestigious (from a non-athletic standpoint), Stevens said. But focusing on conferences that play nationally competitive football, the next two most stable -- the Big 10 and the Pac-10 (now called the Pac-12) -- also include many members that not only enjoy football success, but are academic powerhouses.

This is not a coincidence, the paper argues. As institutions join conferences with more academically prestigious members, the new institutions’ *U.S. News* peer rankings start to rise, at statistically significant rates, becoming more similar to those already in the conference.

And the paper says that, at some level, universities understand that. The paper quotes Bob Kustra, president of Boise State University (which has a highly rated football team), at a press conference where he was asked why the university wasn’t considered for the Pac-10 when that conference recently expanded. “When you are going into the Pac-10, it’s not just the stadium or competition. It’s about what kind of university you are.... It’s part of the reason why we are building our research programs and our graduate programs.”

This link between the athletic and academic prestige is key to understanding football in ways fans might miss, the authors write. “[W]e document the existence of multiple status systems in higher education, showing that these systems mutually influence one another and, in doing so, shape the topography of the status terrain that schools must navigate.”

While making the argument that much of football is about status, the authors also note the money can’t be ignored when talking about big-time college football. And that part of their study came up in the question period, when Stevens was asked about the recent move by the Association of American Universities (which judges institutions by research measures) to expel the University of Nebraska at Lincoln at the same that the Big 10 was inviting it to join.

The sociologists said this showed that status has its limits, and that Nebraska probably won the competition to join the Big 10 on an analysis of what it would bring the conference economically. “This is a business at the end of the day,” said one sociologist. Even status takes a back seat to money.

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