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*Encouraging identification with institutions is the purpose of external relations, and televised athletics presents a useful tool.*

## Institutional Advancement and Spectator Sports: The Importance of Television

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The initial investigation of the connections between athletic success and voluntary support in higher education by Marts (1934) found that the aggregate endowment of the sixteen institutions attempting to develop a strong football program had increased 117 percent in the 1920s while the sixteen schools without a focus on football saw an increase of 126 percent. He also established that the universities with the focus on football all had a large increase in debt and were in poor financial investigation.

Over the past three decades, the research literature on the interaction between winning and giving, although still modest, has deepened. But there remains little consensus about whether success on the field is positively related to an increase in institutional support. The empirical evidence is mixed, and even the design of various studies in the area and the ability of the researcher to interpret data objectively are in question.

But what if we were to explore not winning but the potential impact that the popular media, namely television exposure, have on universities with visible athletic programs? Does such exposure encourage private donations and student applications, thus enhancing overall institutional prestige, perhaps for both winning and losing teams alike (even though one could

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*Note:* The author presented a longer version of this chapter as a research paper at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in Louisville, Ky., November 2007.



argue winning is more powerful)? Given the broad reach of television and its power in developing a university or college as a brand, it may be that the real question is not one of winning and giving, but instead of the impact of exposure on moving toward institutional goals. After reviewing the research literature on athletic success and fundraising and admissions, I explore the idea of “advertainment,” suggesting that athletics as entertainment and universities as a product merge through televised spectator sports. I then consider the theories of affective classical conditioning (AC) and mere exposure (ME), both of which television also enables. Finally, I explore how television encourages individuals to identify with institutions. In doing so, I suggest that television exposure may be a better predictor of improvements in fundraising and admissions than is winning.

### **Winning and Fundraising**

Supporters of significant institutional investments in spectator sports justify these through two accepted “truths” in higher education. The first is that successful programs in sports such as football lead to increased revenue, including from donations. The second is that national-level exposure through athletics increases interest in the university from prospective students, leading to more and better applications, especially from out-of-state students. Spectator sports are thus connected with philanthropy and admissions, both of which are critical in advancing institutional prestige and increasing resources (which administrators also generally perceive as strongly connected).

Some of the earliest attempts to link winning and support concluded there was little, if any, link between the two (Marts, 1934; Budig, 1976). Sigelman and Carter (1979) analyzed 138 Division I institutions, concluding that “according to a number of different statistical criteria, we have found no support for the thesis that alumni giving is connected to athletic performance” (p. 291).<sup>1</sup> Gaski and Etzel (1984) collected data on ninety-nine universities, reaching a similar conclusion: there is not evidence to support the hypothesis that winning increases donations by alumni. Also, Turner, Meserve, and Bowen (2001) conclude that the giving rate is unaffected by the football win-loss record at Division I-A and Ivy League institutions, and Covell (2005) reaches the same conclusion for Ivy League institutions. Sack and Watkins (1985) also found that “yearly fluctuations in a school’s football performances have little or no impact on yearly changes in alumni contributions” (p. 304).

But Sack and Watkins caution that this does not mean athletics cannot otherwise influence alumni giving: “College sport is often at the center of campus social life. Around it has grown homecoming, football weekends, and a wide variety of collegiate rituals which keep alumni in touch with their schools” and thus perhaps more likely to give (p. 304). In addition, Sigelman and Carter note that the perception that winning and giving are

related, even if proven mistaken by statistical evidence, is likely to remain strong. In other words, those in higher education are more likely to trust their instincts here than they are to consider empirical conclusions. Also, Gaski and Etzel speculate that “perhaps successful football and basketball teams do have an impact on fund-raising but only as a cumulative effect built up over a great number of years” (p. 31). Success on the field consequently “enhances a school’s public image which, ultimately, translates into increased donations” (p. 31). Gaski and Etzel suggest that exposure through various media outlets—even exposure just for the sake of exposure—could directly influence an institution in predicted ways, apart from winning.

Rhoads and Gerking (2000) control for heterogeneity over time between and among universities, exploring data from 1986–87 and 1995–96 at eighty-six institutions, several of which have a strong tradition in spectator sports (and presumably significant investments in athletics). They found that “year-to-year” changes in athletic success “have no effect on total educational contributions, but do appear to affect the component of total contributions coming from alumni” (p. 249). However, the effect is “relatively weak” when compared to that of the quality of students and faculty, suggesting that alumni may respond to athletic success more than other donors do. In addition, the authors speculate that the rewards from building a successful athletic program may come more readily than from developing strong academic programs, because donors are able to appreciate the improvements more readily. It is much easier to witness success on the field, especially if “prospective donors have difficulty judging academic improvements and changes in academic reputation lag behind actual improvements” (p. 257). Spaeth and Greeley (1970) also found that winning football teams contribute to raising the level of contributions to an institution, concluding that students from wealthier backgrounds are also more likely to give.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Brooker and Klastorin (1981) conclude that factors such as conference membership and institutional size matter in whether winning increases giving—and given the right set of variables, strong relationships appear to exist. They argue that “a reasonable interpretation of these results would seem to be that institutional visibility, indicated by school size and dominance within the state, is positively related with athletic success in influencing alumni donations” (p. 749). I contend that television exposure is one such variable, providing important (and even unique) visibility to the institutions competing.<sup>3</sup>

### **Winning and Admissions**

Like the decision to donate to a university or college, the choice to attend an institution includes multiple factors and varies with the individual. In admissions, students select institutions on the basis of some combination of location, cost, programs, reputation, quality, culture, and so on. The decision, in many respects, is a qualitative one; the “feel” of a campus and other softer

factors tend to matter. Here, athletics programs with significant exposure contribute. Tucker (2004) concludes that “when a student selects a university, he or she seeks a diploma that is a combination of human capital investment to yield future higher income and psychic benefit” (p. 657). Spectator sports may be part of that psychic benefit, with the reach of teams into the popular culture enhancing the aura of an institution, while differentiating it from others and even legitimizing it. (For instance, the State University of New York flagship institutions have recently invested, or reinvested, in spectator sports, because it is a marker of the type of institution they are.) Toma (2003) suggests the power of spectator sports in building identification of external constituents, in particular, with institutions, and how sports such as football contribute to institutional culture, both in form and substance. He cautions, however, that it is an incomplete and contradictory tool for universities and colleges, and it can even be “inconsistent with many of their core purposes” (p. 187).

In exploring the connection between athletics success and admissions, Toma and Cross (1998) explored the number of undergraduate applications an institution received in a few years preceding and following winning a national championship in football and men’s basketball. They compared these with changes in data for similar years at peer institutions that did not win a championship, thus better isolating “athletic success as a factor in the college choice process” (p. 633). They found that “notable increases generally occurred in admissions applications received—both in absolute terms but more importantly relative to peer schools—in the years following the championship season,” particularly when the championship season was a compelling story, such as an underdog prevailing (p. 633). Similarly, McCormick and Tinsley (1990) conclude that athletics is important to an institution through what they call “advertainment.” In their study of 150 Division I colleges and universities, they examined the impact of successful football programs on the number of undergraduate applications, finding increases in both applications received and the quality of the class enrolled, as measured by standardized test (SAT) scores. They connect such increases, in part, to media exposure: “College athletic contests attract viewers and media attention, which lure prospective students, faculty, and donors, and maintain contact between alumni and alma mater” (p. 193).

### **Televised Games and “Advertainment”**

From its launch in the 1950s, televised football has become an important aspect of American culture, attracting significant audiences. More recently, the annual men’s basketball tournament every March has also become a highlight of the sports calendar, approaching baseball’s World Series in popularity. With so many people paying such close attention, those involved in marketing at higher education institutions have embraced the opportunity to use televised athletics to disseminate messages about institutional priorities. More prominent conferences and programs attract the most attention, and thus

have the greatest potential utility as marketing vehicles. There is a clear aristocracy in televised college sports, with a handful of teams appearing on television regularly and others having to be more strategic and aggressive in finding opportunities to play before the camera (Dunnivant, 2004). In football, traditional powerhouses such as Notre Dame, Michigan, Southern California, or Oklahoma are as likely as not to be featured in a nationally televised game on a given Saturday (as would North Carolina, Duke, Kentucky, or Kansas in men's basketball). Meanwhile, programs in less prominent conferences such as the Mid-American or Sun Belt increasingly find themselves playing weekday football games or basketball games early or late in the day to attract television.

Doing so is essential if an institution is going to fully realize its investment in spectator sports through raising the national, regional, and local profile of the institution. Television is already significant—and is only becoming more so. Exposure is how programs maintain their elite status or enter into the upper echelon. Fresno State, for instance, has leveraged its non-Saturday appearances on national television, increasing its profile much more significantly as if they had still won consistently, but done so on Saturday afternoons without the camera present. Fresno State has taken advantage of the greater availability of opportunities to appear on television that has come with the rise of cable networks, including the several secondary ESPN channels, but also with the traditional networks and ESPN offering ever more content.

Advertainment, the merging of advertising and programming, has also increased. Advertainment is either advertisement as entertainment or consumer products in an entertainment program, including sometimes integrating what is essentially a commercial into the plot (Kretchmer, 2004). The “sophisticated taste” campaign by Taster's Choice coffee in the 1990s tells short stories of characters interacting around the product, for example. The use of the Mini Cooper vehicle in the film *The Italian Job* is not the sole reason for the production, but it is integrated into the plot. Televised spectator sports are the fusion of entertainment (the game) and a product (the university), the institution employing the event as part of its overall approach to branding. As such, the athletics and institutions essentially co-brand, with broadcasts including shots of campus and reference to academics, indicating the major of student athletes, for instance. Also, part of the appeal—and even the legitimacy—of both is that they are connected with one another. Being attached to a university makes intercollegiate athletics more attractive; the presence of spectator sports enhances the allure of institutions.

### **Affective Classical Conditioning and Mere Exposure Advertising**

Institutions have employed spectator sports in their marketing for a century, perceiving that it enables connections that would not occur in other ways. Developing such brands is critical. People are willing to pay so much for certain brand

names because they add value, causing quite similar products to sell for quite different prices (Cobb-Walgren, Rubel, and Donthu, 1995). The taste difference between Coca-Cola and the supermarket generic are negligible, but many people will pay more for a Coke. The same is true of differences in pricing in higher education, where there is more perceived value but little difference between programs among institutions. A brand enhances a product beyond its functional value (Farquhar, 1989). Resources committed to branding can pay off.

But what actually develops a brand? Baker (1999) analyzed affective classical conditioning (AC) and mere exposure (ME) advertising techniques and how they influence a potential consumer to choose a brand. In both AC and ME, affect is transferred, via advertising, to a brand. With affective classical conditioning, connecting an “unconditional stimulus (e.g., a beautiful sunset) with a conditioned stimulus (e.g., Tylenol) can cause the conditioned stimulus (Tylenol) to automatically evoke a conditioned response (i.e., the same good feeling that the beautiful sunset evokes)” (Baker, 1999, p. 31; Shimp, Stuart, and Engle, 1991). Similarly, associating success in football, which is an appealing notion for many people, with an institution more broadly is an illustration of affective classical conditioning, as the success becomes associated with the university. Consider how the University of Notre Dame has leveraged its strong football brand in building the institution as a whole, including as a brand. Indeed, Notre Dame, like most institutions, would not likely become a household brand strictly based on its accomplishments in research and teaching. Prominent athletics allow an institution to insert itself into the popular culture—and thus into the lives of potential consumers, developing a brand associated with both.

Mere exposure is even more straightforward, according to Baker: “the repeated exposure of a stimulus (Tylenol), in the absence of any other stimuli (i.e., only the name is repeated), can evoke an effective response” (Baker, 1999, p. 31; Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968). Thus the more Harvard University is described as the leading university in America, the more the public accepts the notion, strengthening its brand. Spectator sports certainly afford opportunities for mere exposure, given the sustained attention they receive, especially when televised.

Both the affective conditioning and mere exposure concepts further suggest that regardless, it is less about whether a team wins or loses and instead about how often it is seen, as on television. People who encounter a university or college through a game are unlikely to remember the result, but instead simply that the institution was competing on television. Because televised games are associated with the leading athletics programs and many of the most prominent institutions nationally, there is an AC effect. The ME impact comes with simply being mentioned or noticed in a given context, as when the media reports the final score of a game involving the institution. If AC and ME can translate into people developing attitudes about a brand that lead to them actually purchasing it (brand choice), then they have succeeded in branding a product.

### **Institutional Identification**

Branding is really about encouraging people to develop a relationship with a product such that they are more likely to purchase it. A desired byproduct of branding is institutional identification, the connections that people form with organizations that are strengthened through such means as advertainment, affective classical conditioning, and mere exposure. The idea of institutional identification is straightforward enough: the stronger the relationship is between an organization and those associated with it, the greater their willingness to engage in behaviors that support the group (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). In essence, people come to identify themselves in relation to a given organization (Kelman, 1961). Mael (1988) found that alumni who strongly identified with their alma mater were more likely to both financially support the school and be active in recruiting new students.

Also, the more appealing people perceive an organization to be, the more likely they are to support it. Even a losing baseball team, according to Fisher and Wakefield (1998), has fans identify with it, on the basis of the “desirable and aspirational” traits of its individual players (p. 31). Fans come to see themselves as part of the team (Cialdini and others, 1976), especially when they regularly engage with it, as television viewers for instance; this is a powerful notion in areas such as external relations in higher education. Sustained investment in a team is the key variable, more than winning. Investment, of course, requires exposure, which is what television provides, serving to connect people to “their” institutions. Not everyone is a sports fan, but alumni of universities with prominent teams understand that sports matter; they are an important aspect of the institution they have bought into. Consequently, identification with teams becomes a group norm, sustained and even strengthened by regular exposure through television and perhaps more so when teams are successful. People want to associate themselves with organizations that others know and respect, and being on television, even if briefly during the sports highlights, makes an institution more prominent. Identification has tangible outcomes, especially in external relations in higher education. As Madrigal (2000) concludes: “Favorable purchase intentions are more likely to occur . . . as identification with the team increases” and “when such intentions are perceived as a group norm” (p. 13). Identification, reinforced through mere exposure and affective classical conditioning, is a product, in part, of continued exposure through television. Therefore, simply being on television may be enough to encourage fundraising and improve admissions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The significant increase in televised intercollegiate athletics over the past couple of decades presents institutions with a set of powerful opportunities to reach external constituents in ways that translate into donations and applications. Televised sports are the occasion for advertainment and the

mere exposure and affective classical conditioning that tend to enhance institutional identification. With such identification, fundraising and admissions work becomes an easier task, because targeted donors or applicants are already psychologically connected with the institution. Television also expands the reach of larger universities, creating regional and national exposure for the institutions while maintaining a distinct identity. Really, for most institutions, televised sports are the only broad national exposure they receive. For less prominent universities and colleges, it not only fosters the reach that larger institutions routinely enjoy but puts them in the same prestigious league when two teams appear together.

Current research has not focused on the impact of televised intercollegiate athletics on institutional prestige or similar desirable outcomes. Granted, attempting to measure whether winning translates into better fundraising or admissions is more direct; it is easier to quantify. But the very presence of an institution on television, particularly if it is regular, might be the difference between a commonplace perception of it and one of something more. Those studies that find a connection between winning and giving or applications conclude that it is most pronounced when accompanied by some drama, perhaps a traditionally poor team having a breakout season (Sigelman and Carter, 1979; Toma and Cross, 1998), something like the “Flutie Effect” that Fisher discusses in his Chapter 4. Television is significant—essential, really—in exposing external constituents to these stories. Anecdotal evidence of its influence abounds, but there is no real empirical research on the impact of television in areas such as fundraising and admissions, or institutional reputation more broadly.

The challenge is to develop appropriate methods to conduct such research. One of the most difficult problems in comparing institutions is controlling for confounding variables (Toma and Cross, 1998). In other words, isolating television as a variable in some institutional outcome presents a challenge. There are many reasons alumni donate or prospective students apply, for instance, and television exposure is only one of them. But it is a critical one, deserving of attention from scholars and practitioners alike. I encourage them to also consider the advertising effects that I discuss. Really, the key question is not winning and giving or applications, which is where researchers have focused, but instead whether the advertising effect of exposure, not merely success itself, ultimately motivates action. Appraising how television answers such questions goes a long way toward determining whether the significant investments that institutions make in athletics are worth it.

## Notes

1. Brooker and Klastorin (1981) question the assumption implicit in the Sigelman and Carter (1979) article analysis that “Division I colleges and universities form a homogeneous group” (p. 744). Because Sigelman and Carter treat schools in such a diverse



group collectively, they argue that a reexamination of the results is warranted to see if measuring the “homogeneous body” increased variation in the data analysis and “mask[ed] important differences that could have [affected] the conclusions drawn” by the researchers (p. 745).

2. Brooker and Klastorin (1981) note that Spaeth and Greeley do not “examine the effects of successful football teams directly” but instead appear to assume that “emotional attachment is positively related to contributions by the study’s respondents” (p. 744).

3. McCormick and Tinsley (1990) also offer a conclusion on the important question of whether donations to athletics represent lost revenue to the academic endowment: “There is no evidence that athletic booster club fundraising crowds out philanthropic donations to the academic endowment” (p. 200).

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