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Small colleges are using athletics to advance broader institutional aspirations.

Adding Football and the “Uses” of Athletics at NCAA Division II and Division III Institutions

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In announcing establishment of a football program within its National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division I athletic program in 2012 or 2013, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte offered a rationale different from what many would expect (Perimutt, 2008). The UNCC chancellor noted that neither generating revenue nor growing enrollments motivated the decision to start football, recognizing the realities that, apart from the six BCS conferences, few institutions operate athletics without institutional subsidies (Lederman, 2008). (Furthermore, the investment in football will require Charlotte to add women’s sports to maintain compliance with Title IX.) Also, UNCC was likely to expand in enrollment anyway, with projections of thirty-five thousand students by 2020. Instead, UNCC hoped to accomplish two other goals through adding football, something peer institutions Georgia State University and the University of Texas-San Antonio are doing simultaneously and Florida Atlantic and Florida International did in the 1990s. First, football would promote “ownership” of the university among its alumni and those in the Charlotte area, offering “secondary benefits” including contributing to the reputation of the institution. Second, the chancellor offered that football would “enrich the student experience here, enliven school spirit, and serve as one more bond of engagement between the students and their university” (Ludwig, 2008).

On the same day Charlotte announced its football intentions, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) reported the influence of new

athletics programs on Division III Adrian College. The addition of six varsity teams cost the Michigan college about \$30 million, including construction of various facilities. But the college has experienced a 50 percent increase in enrollment, three thousand additional applicants, 21 percent greater selectivity, and a \$20 million increase in its budget. At UNCC, adding twenty-five or so students in a given year is accomplished with ease. At Adrian, enrolling twenty-five football players annually is a significant addition, especially considering these students would not likely have found Adrian without the football program. Because of the increase in its financial position, Adrian has renovated academic buildings and hired additional tenure-significant faculty. That over one-half of its entering class is now varsity athletes may present challenges, but Adrian has chosen a path that appears to be advancing its aspirations.

Both Charlotte and Adrian are using intercollegiate athletics strategically in positioning the institution. In considering these strategies, I suggest a categorization of “use” and conclude with an exploration of Division II and III institutions that recently added football programs, focusing on the uses of college sports at smaller institutions.

Developing Character and Institutional Advancement

A longstanding rationale for intercollegiate athletics is the contribution it makes to the personal development of those participating. Supporters argue that the benefits of competing in college sports are not unlike those gained from involvement in other extracurricular activities (Miller and Kerr, 2002). However, competition that draws significant external interest—spectator sports, such as football and men’s basketball within the largest athletic programs—is typically removed, often significantly, from character development purposes. Its function is more commercial in nature. Even though those competing are technically amateurs, they are essentially entertainers. Still, most athletes participate on the more amateur side. Even in an athletics program that gathers ninety thousand spectators for Saturday football games and attracts a television audience in the millions, sports such as swimming and golf are essentially amateur. The same is true even of football and men’s basketball at all but the most prominent athletic programs. But even participation here is questioned, with research indicating that sport as “currently conducted in America does not appear to develop character” (Stoll and Beller, 2000, p. 24). Ogilvie and Tutko (1985) conclude that athletics may in fact inhibit character growth in some areas.

The potential contributions of intercollegiate athletics to institutional advancement are clearer. At larger institutions, the attention that spectator sports attract has uses in institutional advancement, as with the possibilities for football at Charlotte. Such purposes date back over a century, when institutional leaders discovered that the external interest in what began as a student activity could translate into exposure, and by extension resources

(Smith, 1988). They quickly came to view athletics as a tool, with sports operating as an identifier for the institution and a means to attract people to it (Bale, 1991; Rooney, 1987). Chu (1985) notes:

The acquisition of money and students through the development of intercollegiate sport may be seen as a “diversification” of the business of higher education into a new market. With the difficulties of gaining significantly more funds and enrollments through traditional means, college leaders particularly valued the publicity, contributions, and allotments that institutions gained through the exploits of their sports teams [p. 47].

Accordingly, many institutions invested in football, including building stadiums—seventy-five thousand seats at Yale in 1914 and roughly the same at Berkeley in 1923, for example. Presidents also employed football to “transform the image of higher education [as effete] by depicting the college man as rugged, fearless, and capable of holding his own in the rough-and-tumble world outside academe” (Porto, 2003, p. 24).

Given the usefulness of spectator sports in institutional advancement, presidents and others were willing to work through any challenges associated with maintaining amateur ideals and educational values in a commercial and professional environment. Patterson (2000) states:

Presidents and other educational leaders failed to reform abuses in athletics not because of a loss of nerve or ignorance about the problem, but rather because they were participants in the transformation of colleges and universities from guardians of academic integrity, ethical conduct, and institutional mission to market-driven businesses as obsessed with image, self-promotion, and the “product” as any athletic enterprise [p. 121].

Even at smaller colleges such as Adrian, a purpose of athletics is to attract students who desire to continue competing, thus enabling the institution to more readily reach enrollment targets. The contemporary leveraging of college sports is hardly new: “[The] temptation to overemphasize college sports is not exceptional, but is, rather, part of both higher education’s institutional heritage and our national culture from which few colleges and universities have been immune” (Thelin, 1994, p. 163).

More specifically, spectator sports in particular have four primary uses: entertainment, identity, identification, and revenue. Athletics entertains the broader university community, notably the students who fill the student section at football games as well as locals who become passionate (or simply casual) supporters of teams, especially in spectator sports. In doing so, college sports create a more vibrant campus. Critics suggest that entertainment is an inappropriate function for a university and can distract from legitimate educational purposes (Gerber, 1997; Sperber, 2000; Telander, 1996). Teams and games also provide institutions with an identity. Toma (2003) suggests

that there is little to distinguish one large institution from the next, with athletics being a notable exception. Athletics also encourages identification between individuals and institutions, causing them to want to strengthen their connection and announce their affiliation (Toma, Dubrow, and Hartley, 2005). They constitute a ready means for alumni, in particular, to continue a relationship with the institution, an association that is important in motivating financial contributions. There is also the possibility that success on the field or court draws additional applications for admission, although conclusions here among researchers are mixed, as Anctil outlines in his Chapter 3 (Toma and Cross, 1998) Finally, spectator sports can attract revenue, whether directly through ticket sales and television contracts or less directly through encouraging giving and applications. Except for a relative few larger programs, athletics programs do not operate in the black, typically receiving a subsidy from their institution.

Adding Football: Divisions II and III

I have already suggested why Charlotte and Adrian, two contrasting institutions, are adding athletics programs. UNCC will also likely need to add multiple women's programs to be in compliance with Title IX. Adrian, like other smaller institutions, which tend to be in Divisions II and III of the NCAA, will not only derive enrollment benefits from enhancing its commitment to athletics. It will also gain, to some extent, value in the four areas I have just identified: entertainment, identity, identification, and revenue. As at Charlotte, it is important for smaller institutions to connect with their local communities, and sports at a place like Adrian will tend to draw some spectators. Athletics also has the potential to improve less tangible, yet still critical, areas such as campus climate and "school spirit." These are perceived to be important in both attracting and retaining students (Toma, 2003). In doing so, institutions improve their financial position. Consequently, I am interested in why Division II and III athletics programs would expand their athletic offerings, and in the extent to which institutions nationally are doing it presently.

There is little research on the uses of athletics at this level, but a recent white paper, the *NCAA Division II Values Study*, is instructive. It suggests several impacts of Division II scholarship athletics, particularly on culture and enrollment. Specifically, Division II athletics may (1) boost enrollment in the middle of the student academic profile, (2) build overall enrollment among men, (3) increase the overall academic profile for women, (4) increase ethnic and geographic diversity, (5) enhance community service and volunteer activities, and (6) generate "optimal" tuition revenue through use of smaller athletics scholarships given to more students. However, the report also indicates that men's sports may have a negative impact on the overall academic profile of men, and athletes generally require more aid to attend the institution.

Another NCAA report on issues in Division III, titled *Key Issues Related to the Growth of Division III*, suggests that institutions using athletics to build enrollments may be increasing tension, both within and between institutions. One challenge is that with such a high percentage of students being athletes there is the risk of creating a creeping “athletic culture” on campus and diminishing the academic efforts of the institution (Bowen and Levin, 2003; Shulman and Bowen, 2002). Moreover, the trend makes implicit—or even underscores—that athletic excellence, not academic achievement, is a primary access point to higher education for some. Between Division III institutions, there is increasing concern that some may be at a competitive disadvantage; disparities are emerging in the size of rosters and depth of talent. Even though no Division III institution offers scholarships, having some institutions more than others emphasize athletics presents a significant challenge. Having the success of a university or college hinge to some degree on its ability to recruit students to populate teams has real implications, because it increases the potential for admitting students who are less likely to be a good fit within the institution.

To explore these notions more empirically, I examined six Division II or III institutions that added football during the 2002 or 2003 academic years, also drawing on the most recent available data (up through 2006–07) from the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) reports. The EADA is an annual federal report that requires co-educational institutions to disclose their financial allocations and structural operations in athletics for a given fiscal year. I offer four observations below. It is important to remember that athletics was not the only variable in a given year that may have influenced enrollment or finances; clearly it is not the only driver of such outcomes.¹

My first observation is that addition of football may exert some initial positive influence on overall enrollment, but enrollment decreases over time. At two of the Division II institutions, enrollment increased by three hundred or more students, but the increase stabilized and then declined over time, reaching a level below that before adding football. With the other Division II example, the addition of football had virtually no effect on enrollment, which declined in the years following. The Division III institutions also had increases in enrollment on adding football, followed by a decline, but they maintained a level higher than before the addition of football, though certainly not at their enrollment peak. The other Division III campus had a steady increase in overall enrollment, but because the institution is so small, the gains were not particularly impressive in real numbers.

Another observation is that the addition of football seems to have an impact on the percentage of men in the overall enrollment. In all six cases, the percentage of men enrolled at the institution increased, most often a bit less than 10 percent, but in one case by 19 percent. Recruiting men is a challenge for many smaller institutions, so adding football may offer a strategy (attracting football players), of course, but also potentially appeal to men generally. However, Title IX compliance may become a challenge as male

participation in athletics and enrollments at the institution increase. Under Title IX, opportunities for men and women to compete must be roughly equal, and the percentage of women participating in intercollegiate athletics should be similar to their percentage of enrolled students at the university or college. Having more football players requires that institutions increase female sports participation, so as not to skew the split between men and women in the athletic department or the comparison between women enrolled and women competing in sports. In each of the six cases, the increase in athletics participation by men outpaces that for women, with the numbers for women actually declining in some cases.

Third, athletics subsidy increases significantly with the addition of football. At the three Division III institutions, athletics subsidy doubled in one instance and increased three times in another and five times in the third situation. In Division II, the increase was even more dramatic, with two institutions enjoying an increase in athletics costs of more than \$3.5 million, while the other increased more than \$2 million during the six-year period. Football requires additional spending, of course, on salaries, equipment, travel, and the like. The idea is that increases in enrollment, in conjunction with any revenues that football generates, will compensate for these increased costs. (Even with football, smaller institutions are still likely to continue subsidizing athletics programs, and these transfers are reflected in the revenue they report annually). But again, five of the six institutions I examined actually lost enrollment while increasing athletics spending. In real terms, the institution was spending more with less tuition dollars at hand, which is certainly not the claim one often hears in making the case for the “use” of athletics.

My final observation is that athletes as a percentage of overall enrollment at Division II or III institutions increases only slightly with the addition of football. In five of the cases, adding football showed an increase of only 4 percent in one case and 3 percent or less in the others. Moreover, the percentage of athletes appears to move up and down without a trend, seemingly more connected with shifts in overall enrollment. Whether adding football encourages the development of “athletics culture” on campus is unclear, and perhaps minimal.

Concluding Thoughts

Without question, there is a need to examine the familiar claims about the uses of intercollegiate athletics at smaller institutions. When an institution enhances its commitment to athletics, it has an impact in some areas, including enrollments and subsidy. The indirect impacts are less clear: the extent to which athletics contributes to the entertainment, identity, and identification that can improve both campus environment and external relations. Each is important in generating revenue, whether through enrollments and tuition or alumni and contributions. It is also important to ask

whether the strategic uses of athletics at smaller institutions influence matters such as retention. Success stories may be less compelling below the surface.

Note

1. Also, I did not explore whether these institutions added teams other than in football or subtracted teams, men’s or women’s. Doing so might influence enrollment or financial numbers. Nor did I explore applications received or retention rate, or overall institutional expenditures such that I could report athletics spending as a percentage of that.

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