

Sports scandals cost higher ed big

Last week in this column I summarized some studies showing that most athletic programs at colleges and universities are run at a financial loss. I also addressed how other aspects of some athletic programs have become liabilities in other ways, including the seemingly never-ending scandals that take place around those programs. But do scandals result only in a bad image for the institutions, or are there also financial consequences to them?

In a study just published titled, "Universities Behaving Badly: The Impact of Athletic Malfeasance on Student Applications and Enrollment," several researchers from Appalachian State University and Seton Hall University were able to quantify not only the financial impact, but the academic repercussions of athletic scandals.

The study's authors began by acknowledging the fact that many institutions of higher education use athletics much more than academics as the main way that they publicize their institutions. Therefore, when they have highly publicized athletic successes, like an invitation to a Bowl game or victories during "March Madness," they not only maximize their marketing around those feats, but also see an increase in the number of applications. This way to "brand" an institution becomes even more

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critical to those institutions facing declining enrollments, given that even public colleges and universities have become more and more dependent on athletics. Therefore, athletic programs have become the "front porch" of these institutions.

So, what happens when these institutions face scandals tied to their athletic programs? These researchers found that, "there is a negative effect on the student profile when bad events occur," and that "a negative impact occurs on both the quantity and quality of students choosing to attend a university."

The study looked at NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) men's postseason basketball tournament bans from 119 Division I men's basketball programs from 2000 to 2013. They found that postseason basketball bans lowered male student applications by 17 percent when compared to two years before the ban, 13 percent when compared with one year before the ban, and 9 percent the year of the ban. For female students, the impact was similar although a little bit higher — 18, 12, and 10 percent respectively.

There is also a negative

effect of athletic malfeasance on the quality of students who apply to those universities. These researchers found that an athletic malfeasance leading to a postseason tournament ban lowers the number of enrolled students from the top 10 percent of their high school class by 14 percent in the year of the ban, 7 percent the year after the ban, and 6 percent two years after the ban. "Our results are consistent with the supposition that prospective students use athletics as a signal for university quality.

"Given that high academically achieving students are sought after by many universities, they detected malfeasance of an infracting sports program could serve as a signal to these high academically achieving students to choose another university given their large choice set of universities available," according to the report.

To make things worse, it seems that the response to athletic scandals by university presidents and boards of trustees is not to scale those programs back, but rather increase financial expenditures for coach salaries and facilities. This is what economists call the "Sunk Cost Fallacy," that is, the

misconception that you make rational decisions based on the future value of objects, investments and experiences, while the reality is that your decisions are tainted by the emotional investments you accumulate. The more you invest in something, the harder it becomes to abandon it.

We have many examples of this phenomenon in the recent history of the U.S. Take, for example, the Vietnam War or the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. No matter how many billions of dollars the U.S. expended in those ventures, nothing fundamentally changed over the years.

This study also shows that the bad name given by athletic programs ameliorates as time goes by, and that is also bad news because it creates the impression among college presidents and the boards of trustees that if they wait to deal with the problem long enough the problem will go away by itself. Thus, real corrective action never takes place.

This obsession with quasi-professional athletic programs for which the college athletes do not really benefit financially, has other negative consequences. When colleges advertise their athletic successes, they tie them to student amenities such as recreational facilities, student extracurricular activities, and fancy dormitories. This connection generates

the image of institutions of higher education as spas or vacation resorts rather than as places of intellectual endeavors. And that is just fine with politicians and their mouthpieces who keep attacking institutions of higher education as elite places not worthy of public support. After all, why do these institutions need extra cash if they give the impression that they are making a lot of money through their athletic programs?

To that we have to add the fact that it also shows the inability of marketing branches and top academic officers to communicate the real reason why their institutions exist: academics. Therefore, they just resort to use the word "excellence" when it comes to teaching and scholarly activities and that's it. In fact, if you take a look at college and university Web sites, finding one that does not use that word "excellence" to describe their academics is almost as difficult as winning the lottery.

It is time for the leaders of institutions of higher education to show some rationality and moral compass when it comes to athletic programs. To put it in a single phrase: "academics first."

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