

Does Starting New Football Programs Help Universities?

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The recession of 2008 constrained many facets of growth in U.S. higher education, but did not slow the expansion of college football programs or the additions of new ones. More than 170 universities have added new football programs since 1970 – and that includes more than 50 teams initiated since 2007. College leaders believe that athletic success brings many other benefits such as bigger donations, more student applications, and improved quality. What is more, cuts in government spending on higher education have shifted the financial burden to tuition, tightening the competition among universities seeking to attract students. Because research shows that it is cheaper to retain currently enrolled students than to recruit new ones who may also drop out later, many universities try to improve the “student experience” – which can include ensuring that there is an exciting football team to root for, either an improved team or a new one.

Do the real costs and benefits measure up to the rosy expectations? New research on 120 institutions using data on numbers of applications, student achievement scores, and trends in enrollments, along with basic information on university location, spending, and the attributes of professors and student bodies, reveals how hard it is to successfully launch a beneficial football program. Although building on athletic success may bring rewards, starting a new team does not guarantee net benefits – and there may be better alternative strategies for enhancing quality.

Benefits of Athletic Success

Previous research has documented that college athletic success, particularly in football, is linked to overall increases in donations, student applications, enrollments, and student quality. Additionally, university leaders cite football as a key way to build campus community, stoke school spirit, and create a unique institutional identity. A strong sense of community can positively affect student outcomes – for example, by lowering drug use, improving academic performance, and helping more students finish their degrees.

Available data suggest that successful football programs increase the quality of applicants for universities competing at the upper levels of the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

- Tellingly, these results are stronger for universities with longstanding strong football traditions, and weaker for those with recent success.
- Successful football teams also improve alumni giving and graduation rates, but the same effects do not hold for men’s basketball.
- Post-season appearances in both men’s football and basketball increase giving in public universities, but not private universities.

On the other side of the ledger, however, institutions that discontinue their football teams have not experienced reductions (or any changes) in the number of student applications they receive.

Why Do Universities Add New Football Programs?

To learn more about the considerations that come into play when leaders of universities without longstanding football programs contemplate adding new ones, we examined six publicly available feasibility studies conducted by universities contemplating this choice. These included studies for three universities that chose to implement new football programs – Georgia State University, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the University of West Florida – and also studies done by three institutions that chose not to move ahead

– Cleveland State University, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi and the University of California, San Diego. Potential benefits highlighted did not vary between the schools that moved ahead and those that did not. All six studies focused on cost and sustainability, and also discussed potential intangible benefits that new football programs could bring.

- Every study highlighted at least two potential benefits – invariably including enhancements to community – but none highlighted all eight benefits. All studies referred to successes by other schools implementing football programs and examined financial costs and benefits. Four studies cited the benefit of increased student applications and the contributions of football to a more complete college experience. Three studies touted football as providing a unique institutional identity and increasing connections to alumni and donations from them.
- The studies for Georgia State University and Cleveland State University underlined the desire to move from a commuter university to a more traditional model. Enrollments at Florida Gulf Coast University and the University of California, San Diego were already increasing without football, so the studies for these universities stressed benefits from enhanced community and a more complete college experience. The study for the University of North Carolina at Charlotte emphasized that adding a football team could overcome disconnections between the campus and the sizeable alumni base residing in the surrounding area.

A Mixed Picture

To explore the impact of adding new football programs, we tracked 120 schools from 2004 to 2014. Universities that added football teams increased the number of applications by 13.7 percent compared to schools without football, but achievement scores for accepted students went down and retention rates were slightly lower. These mixed results suggest that the benefits of new football programs have been oversold. Universities must be careful before entering into a new multi-million dollar commitment. Compared to the impact of a new football program, student quality and retention are boosted more by other factors such as faculty quality and pay.

Although we do not question the benefits that have been documented for schools with established football programs, we conclude that similarly good results are not automatic for new programs. Of course, universities considering this choice are moved by many facets of their history, location, and aspirations. But leaders should proceed with care if their overall aim is not simply to increase applications but to improve student quality and retention.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from Eric Joseph Van Holm and Sandy Zook, “Returns for a Touchdown? Universities Entering College Football,” Georgia Institute of Technology and Georgia State University (forthcoming).