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978-1-107-00434-4 - Big-Time Sports in American Universities

Charles T. Clotfelter

Frontmatter

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For almost a century, big-time college sports has been a wildly popular but consistently problematic part of American higher education. The challenges it poses to traditional academic values have been recognized from the start, but they have grown more ominous in recent decades, as cable television has become ubiquitous, commercial opportunities have proliferated, and athletic budgets have ballooned. Drawing on new research findings, this book takes a fresh look at the role of commercial sports in American universities. It shows that, rather than being the inconsequential student activity that universities often imply that it is, big-time sports has become a core function of the universities that engage in it. For this reason, the book takes this function seriously and presents evidence necessary for a constructive perspective on its value. Although big-time sports surely creates worrisome conflicts in values, it also brings with it some surprising positive consequences.

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For J.H.C., the Varsity, and Grant Field

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Preface

Several hundred of the largest American universities do something not seen in universities anywhere else in the world. They sponsor athletic programs whose revenues, media coverage, and notoriety give them a striking resemblance to professional sports franchises. This fact is as unremarkable to most adults who were raised in this country as it must surely be strange to a first-time visitor from abroad. As an American who grew up following football and basketball as a fan and high school sports editor, I accepted as part of the natural order of things that athletic teams sponsored by universities like Georgia Tech and Penn State would compete in highly publicized games and that people like me might become emotionally invested in the outcomes. Even during my college years, when I had a very brief stint as a sports writer, I found nothing out of the ordinary about either the size of the college sports enterprise or the widespread interest in it.

It was not until I became a faculty member that I began to think there might be anything remarkable about the phenomenon of big-time college sports. As I began a career working alongside scholars at two research universities that also operate prominent commercial sports programs, Maryland and Duke, I was surprised at each place not by the attention that the campus and city newspapers devoted to college sports, but by how many faculty and staff members also took a keen interest in the university's teams. The same faculty colleagues who discussed a recent research paper one day might chat about the basketball team's upcoming game the next. And in the first of several brief tours of duty I spent in Duke's academic administration, I was more than a little surprised to discover how thoroughly the offices of the university's top administrators emptied out on the Friday of the first round of the Atlantic Coast Conference basketball tournament. Nor could I fail to notice the perpetual need to consult the basketball team's schedule before setting up a meeting of any significance.

Meanwhile, my administrative service stimulated my own interest in doing research on the economics of higher education. Yet my reading of scholarly research in this area revealed a strange disconnect. Despite what I saw as abundant evidence of the larger-than-life presence of big-time college sports, serious academic research about universities rarely deals with the subject at all. For almost 20 years I was the convener of a working group on higher education at the National Bureau of Economic Research. In the 30 meetings of that group that occurred over this period, scholars presented 176 research papers on topics ranging from financial aid, rising costs, and preferential admissions to faculty retirement, doctoral training, and sponsored research. But only one paper during this entire period had to do with big-time college sports. References to athletics are similarly missing from most official mission statements crafted by universities. Solely on the basis of what is written by those who lead or study these institutions, one could easily conclude that college athletics is little more than a minor extracurricular activity, something that could be added or dropped with no real impact on the university's real work.

Yet my own observations contradicted this official view, suggesting instead that big-time college sports plays quite a big role in the everyday life of universities and the communities and states around them. Indeed, in some regions of the country, and for some Americans across the country, following a favorite college team is a life's passion. The depth of this passion and the bizarre forms it can sometimes take set the commercial sports enterprise apart from all the other activities that universities routinely pursue. Tailgating rituals, painted faces, and screaming fans are part of American higher education as surely as physics labs and seminars on Milton. And this activity is nothing if not prominent, with some college teams playing virtually every one of its games in front of television cameras. In all its colorful manifestations, this enterprise has become by far the most visible feature of many American universities. It was the disparity between this reality and the virtual silence on the subject from scholars and institutions themselves that first motivated me to write this book.

I became increasingly curious not only about the prominent role played by commercial college sports, but also about its remarkable staying power. Despite a steady cavalcade of news stories detailing unsavory aspects of big-time college sports, otherwise reputable and rational universities have continued to operate their programs, striving for athletic success at the same time they pursue excellence in research, teaching, and public service. In the academic spirit of studying "ever-present but overlooked" aspects of everyday life, I decided to employ my skills as a social scientist to ask

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the same elementary question about big-time college sports that might be posed by a first-time visitor to this country. In fact, I came to find out that this was precisely the same question posed in a major national study published in 1929. If this basic question was being raised eight decades ago, one might think, surely by now we would know the answer. Indeed, if you put this question to the president or a trustee of one of the universities with a big-time sports program, you will get answers. The reasons they are apt to give for competing in big-time athletics might include the life lessons that athletes glean through competition, the donations generated from loyal alumni, the boost in student applications that comes from winning championships, or the school spirit that is created by intercollegiate competition. If you were to ask fans or others outside of universities, you might hear that a main reason for operating these kinds of athletic programs is the money they bring in. But my own experience inside universities made me suspect there was more to it than any of these ready explanations would suggest.

This is a book chiefly about higher education, not sports. In it, I address two questions about universities that operate big-time sports programs. First, why do they do it? What explains the survival and apparent vigor of highly visible and commercialized university-sponsored athletic enterprises? And second, what are the consequences for the universities that operate these enterprises? I believe answering the first question will not only help to temper our expectations regarding the possibility of reform, but also serve as a prism for gaining a better understanding of the ultimate purpose of universities. Answering the second question will be a necessary part of any full consideration of the future of American higher education, particularly as it relates to America's declining global rank in educational attainment and the returns we should expect from our enormous investment in public and private universities.

The phenomenon I focus on is not college athletics in general, but merely the most famous manifestation, "big-time" college sports. I define big-time sports as the highly commercialized and widely followed competition in football and basketball that is undertaken by several hundred American universities. Featuring sizable revenues generated by ticket sales and television, this boils down to football in the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS, formerly Division I-A) and basketball in Division I. I devote little attention to the remaining sports or the less competitive levels of college competition because, although their effects are certainly worthy of attention, they generate neither the revenue nor the outsized problems that the revenue sports do. Nor do I deal with such important issues as gender equity or the general effects of students' participation in athletics.

In assessing the consequences for universities of operating commercial sports enterprises, I present all the relevant factual material I could locate or generate. I draw on previous studies by others and on my own new research using a variety of sources of data. For example, to illustrate the prominence and reach of big-time college sports, I examined and counted newspaper articles about major American universities. For those with commercial sports programs, articles about athletics vastly outnumbered those about any other aspects of these institutions. In the book, I also compare the number of Google hits for university presidents and their football and basketball coaches. I document the breathtaking growth in TV coverage for the two major college sports, to the point that the average basketball team in one of the major conferences now appears on television 27 times a season. Thanks to larger stadiums and longer seasons, attendance at games has grown as well, rising over the past three decades at an average rate of 14% a decade in football and 20% in basketball, compared with just 10% a decade for the U.S. population.¹ I also document the growth in spending on athletics, caused in part by a spectacular escalation in coaches' salaries. For example, the average pay for head football coaches at 18 universities with big-time programs, expressed in constant 2009 dollars, increased from \$377,000 in 1981 to more than \$2.4 million in 2009.²

Drawing on detailed information of different kinds, I examine the business of running a big-time athletic department. I show that, despite the growth in TV revenues, the top programs rely heavily on the strong demand for tickets to games, as well as the willingness of affluent boosters to make tax-deductible gifts to secure the best seats and special perks. An annual donation of several thousand dollars a year can easily be required to obtain the privilege of buying season tickets for some of the most popular college football and basketball teams. At the comparatively impoverished end of the big-time college sports pecking order are universities with shorter histories, smaller crowds, and less expensive coaches. They must rely on mandatory student fees and institutional subsidies to pay the bills, in some cases using those sources to cover 70% or more of the athletic budget. For the universities whose teams seldom contend for championships but are lucky enough to be members of established conferences, the sports enterprise is sustained thanks to revenue shared by more successful conference members. Much of this shared revenue comes by way of television and advertising. I show that televised college games are saturated with advertising. Not only are commercials shown during time-outs, pitches for consumer products appear throughout game broadcasts as well.

I also collected new evidence on the connection between big-time sports enterprises and the academic work of the universities that house them. I utilize computerized records from digital archives used by students and other researchers to show how the pace of academic work responds to the schedule of games in the NCAA's annual basketball tournament, and specifically how work is affected at a university whose team wins or loses in the tournament. Students who enroll in universities with big-time sports programs are more affluent and politically conservative than those who go to other universities. And once they are there, they tend to spend less time studying and more time in organized activities, and they are more likely to engage in binge drinking. To see if big-time sports hurts a university's overall quality, I examine changes over time in indicators of quality that are used in *U.S. News* rankings.

The staying power of big-time college sports, and the fact that universities continue to come forward to start new programs of their own or move to a more competitive level, whetted my curiosity about how athletics might be used to bolster the political and financial support that universities constantly seek. To gain insight into this use of college sports, I present new evidence on the political affiliations of athletic boosters compared with other university stakeholders. I also make use of detailed information I gathered through open-records requests to various public universities for the lists of guests invited to sit in presidential boxes at football games, to see what they imply about the institutional uses of big-time football.

I do not neglect the much-debated topics of values and reform. Some of the most serious costs associated with big-time college sports arise when the values of commercial sports come into conflict with time-honored values of universities. Although these costs cannot be quantified, they are an indispensable part of any university's full accounting of the pros and cons of running a commercial sports enterprise. I find, however, that there are some surprising positive entries as well in this value assessment. The book concludes by noting the prospects for reform without delving into the many detailed proposals that have been put forward. Although there is every reason to be skeptical about these prospects, I note several intriguing possibilities, including a change in federal tax policy and a proposal to spin off college teams as separate entities.

Because the research for this book required collecting and analyzing many different kinds of data over the course of several years, I relied on the able assistance of a large number of bright, energetic, and well-trained students, most of whom were students at Duke. They included Rene Alarcon,

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Janeil Belle, Laura Brookhiser, Saidi Chen, Celeste Clipp, Ryan Fleenor, Alexis Kirk, Sam Lim, Robert Malme, Ryan Miller, Sara Pilzer, Holly Presley, James Riddlesperger, Jaime Rooke, Cullen Sinclair, Kevin Wang, Garth Weintraub, and Lila Zhao. I received invaluable assistance in gaining access to data sets and other information from a number of people: Mark Alesia, Anthony Broh, Molly Brownfield, Maureen Devlin, Joline Ezzell, Anne Fletcher, Tara Hofher, Deborah Jakubs, Han Kim, Amy Perko, Jill Riepenhoff, Amy Taylor, and Mark Thomas. I obtained restricted-use data from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Consortium for Financing Higher Education, and JSTOR. I also used data collected and made available by *USA Today* and the *Indianapolis Star*. Financial support was provided by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

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Glossary of Abbreviations and Terms

AAU	Amateur Athletic Union
ACC	Atlantic Coast Conference
ACE	American Council on Education
BCS	Bowl Championship Series
Division I	NCAA division incorporating about 300 universities that play basketball at the most competitive level
Division I-A	term for Football Bowl Subdivision before 2006, the most competitive NCAA subdivision
Division III	the least competitive NCAA division; no athletic scholarships are offered
FBS	Football Bowl Subdivision, the NCAA subdivision adopted in 2006 incorporating about 120 universities that play football at the most competitive level, previously called Division I-A
IPEDS	Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System; data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
JSTOR	Web-based digital archive of academic journals
LSU	Louisiana State University
Pac-10	Pacific 10 Conference
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NC State	North Carolina State University
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
SEC	Southeastern Conference
SMU	Southern Methodist University
SUNY	State University of New York
Title IX	provision of the Education Amendments of 1972 requiring gender equity in college sports

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xviii	<i>Glossary of Abbreviations and Terms</i>
UBIT	Unrelated Business Income Tax
UC	University of California
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
UNC	University of North Carolina
USC	University of Southern California
UT	Most commonly, University of Texas; alternatively, University of Tennessee
UW	University of Washington; alternatively, University of Wisconsin