

Athletic spending in American higher education

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Abstract

Athletic spending is a controversial topic in higher education. The benefits of college sports are obvious to all, while the conflicts on internal resources allocation among different departments are also conspicuous due to the current fiscal situation, especially after COVID-19 began. College sports are criticized as the arms race and overspending. Balancing the budget is specifically important in this time. This paper seeks to build a framework based on Bolman and Deal's four frames and provides some suggestions for universities to better allocate resources in college sports.

Keywords: expenditures, college sports, higher education

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Sports in American higher education has a long history from colonial America as student-organized recreation. With the help of transportation and communication development, intercollegiate athletics started (Flowers, 2009). The first intercollegiate athletic contest happened between Harvard and Yale in 1852. Later in 1906, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NACC) was established to organize intercollegiate athletics. Now, sports are not only students' recreations. Intercollegiate athletics in higher education has become a billion-dollar enterprise. No one in the U.S. can deny the importance of athletics in higher education.

However, some scholars also argued that athletics is an arms race that requires countless input and resources. Now, due to a decline in enrollment and state appropriations, facing increasing expenditures, many higher education institutions meet financial problems. Worse, the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbates universities' finances. Some universities had to lay off their faculty and staff, and some small colleges even had to close. Nevertheless, athletic spending keeps increasing. From 2005 to 2018, the football bowl subdivision (FBS) median increased from 34.69 million dollars to 62.94 million dollars. Meanwhile, in 2018, the total revenue of the FBS median is 61.83 million dollars (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, n.d.). Therefore, it is true that intercollegiate athletics can generate a million-dollar revenue, but it also spends lots of money. Ohio University (OU) reported its athletics expenditures to exceed revenues of around \$20 million annually (Ohio University AAUP (OU-AAUP), 2019). Furthermore, scholars criticize that athletic expenditures are over academic expenditure. The amount that public non-profit universities spend in the largest 'big six' conferences per athlete is more than eight times the spending

on academics per full-time student ("Massive spending gap between athletes and academics, 2018).

It is time to rethink the roles and functions of athletics in American higher education as well as the efficiency of athletic spending. The problems are whether the university should invest so much money on athletics and how to better utilize scarce financial resources. This paper will use Bolman and Dean's (2017) four frames as the theoretical framework to analyze the athletic spending problem in American higher education and seek to provide integrated solutions on that.

Theoretical Framework

Organizations are too complex to view from only one perspective, Bolman and Deal (2017) developed four frames to analyze organization from a holistic vision. The four frames are the structural frame, political frame, human resource frame, and symbolic frame.

The structural frame regards organizations as "factories" stressing on organizational architecture with common goals, responsibility allocation, and integration (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.17). According to the circumstances, organizations develop their goals, and strategies. They further allocate responsibilities to different units and subunits of organizations. By cooperation, various parts work together to fulfill the common goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The political frame views organizations as "jungles" with scarce resources, power, conflict, and coalitions (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.17). Individuals and groups in organizations have different interests and powers. Facing limited resources, some

interests are conflicted. Thus, stakeholders form coalitions to negotiate for their own interests. Among negotiation, power is the crucial element (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The human resources frame sees organizations as “families” focusing on humans and relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.17). This frame stresses the existence of organizations is to serve the human needs, rather than the reverse. The humans do not exist to serve the institution's needs. Bolman and Deal (2017) stated the organization and the people need each other. The organization needs new ideas, energy, and talent from the people. The people need careers, salaries, and career opportunities from the organization. When the fit between the system and the people is poor, one or both will suffer. A good fit between individuals and the organization will allow the organization to develop the talent and energy they need, and the individuals will find meaningful and satisfying work (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

The symbolic frame refers to organizations as “temples and carnivals” emphasizing symbols, meanings, and culture (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.17). The symbolic frame assumes that high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty undercut rational analysis, problem solving, and decision making. Also, activities and meaning are loosely coupled, meaning every event has multiple meanings because people interpret experiences differently. The symbolic perspective questions the traditional views that building a team entail. People create symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, anchor belief and hope (Oltman, 2013).

Analysis

Structural Frame

The ultimate goal of higher education is to “maximize the production and distribution of knowledge subject to their constraints” (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016, p.281), which are mainly taken by the academic departments. But to fulfill the ultimate goal, universities and colleges need funds, prestige, and public support. College sports were developed without being directly related to the core missions of higher education, but in modern American higher education, it is viewed as the method of helping the university to be visible to raise funds and improve prestige. Ideally, athletics would improve reputations, attract donations, and recruit more students, while academic departments focus on teaching and research to improve educational quality and promote the progress of science. Those two parts should complement each other as an effective structure based on the definition of Bolman and Deal (2017). An effective structure is supposed to maximize efficiency.

However, in reality, scholars have debated whether college sports facilitate or hurt the core mission of universities for a long time. The proponents emphasize the advertising effect of college sports success on students’ applications and donations and the impact on students’ academic performance. An advertising effect of college sports can increase applications’ quality as well as quantity to attract more students with higher SAT scores (McCormick & Tinsley 1987; Pope & Pope, 2009; Tucker, 2005). The advertising effect of college sports could be aroused by capturing students’ attention even without improvement of educational quality or increasing input (Pope & Pope, 2008). Some studies argued that athletic success has a positive impact on academic outcomes, like students’ graduation and retention rates, improves selectivity, and reputations (Anderson, 2017; Hickman & Meyer, 2017; Rishe, 2003; Tucker, 2004). On the other hand, the opponents argue that the functions of college sports are limited. Even though it may have negative impacts academically and

financially. Academically, scholars address the academic performances of students and faculty. Shughart et al. (1986) indicated that athletic success is at the cost of academic success of professors since they have to spend more time on sports. As for students, male grades significantly decreased at the same time with the football seasons in fall due to their celebration of sports success with alcohol and parties (Lindo et al., 2012). Hernández-Julián and Rotthoff (2014) also found negative impacts of college football success on academic performance at Clemson University, and it hurts female students more. Financially, Humphreys & Mondello (2007) pointed out that the size of donations from athletic success is small which is limited to the athletic or certain units and may not benefit the academic departments. Other than that, increasing fancy athletic facilities is not helpful to attract student-athletes (Huml et al., 2019).

Above all, the relationship between academics and athletics cannot be simply concluded as a complement or substitute. Besides, most discussions related to college athletics focus on the impact of athletic success. What about those universities and colleges which fail at the games? Not every institution can always win. Moreover, academics and athletics departments are loosely coupled. Faculty view college athletics as an auxiliary enterprise to generate revenue with low priority. Instead of concerning athletics, faculty do not know or care about athletics governance and budget (Lawrence et al., 2009), let alone cooperation.

The current circumstances of universities and colleges are declining enrollments of traditional students and increasing financial challenges, especially since COVID-19 began. Academics and athletics departments are supposed to complement each other to fulfill institutional goals and missions. Whereas, there are

more conflicts between athletics and academics than cooperation due to financial restraints and faculty oversight.

Political Frame

Resources have always been an important topic of higher education. Athletic expenditures is the arms race which indicates more investment in sports than other institutions, a higher possibility to win. Hence, it could lead to unlimited increasing expenditures on college sports. Furthermore, the model of dynamic nonprice competition argued that the decision of one institution is affected by other institutions, thus even when the institution found it over invests in athletics, it may still increase investment (Or et al., 2016). On the other hand, academic departments also need increasing resources to maintain operations, meet students' various needs, and stimulate professors' productivity. However, due to declining enrollment and state appropriations, the growth of revenues of universities and colleges can hardly catch up with the growth of expenditures. Plenty of American universities face financial strain. Worse, the COVID-19 increases expenditures to transition to online and guarantee students' safety while decreasing enrollment and revenues. Facing limited resources and increasing requirements, tensions and conflicts between academics and athletics departments cannot be avoided, which can be analyzed by Bolman and Deal's (2017) political frame.

This key issue of the conflict is budget allocation. Budgeting allocation in universities can be viewed as "power-based negotiation" (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016, p.66). The department with a high level of power can get more internal resources. Meanwhile, the power of departments depends on their abilities to control critical resources and consistency of institutions' missions. To be specific, for

universities, critical resources are enrollments and funds (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Thus, the departments which can recruit more students and attract funds would have more power in negotiating resource allocation. The two main stakeholders related to institutions' internal resource allocation are athletic departments and academics departments. Both are important to recruit students and generate revenues. Athletics have been viewed as a vital part of universities to recruit students, promote educational equality, and attract donations, which involve various stakeholders, like students, coaches, and some trustees. Therefore, when it comes to cutting sports programs or reducing costs, those stakeholders may form the coalition to resist.

However, it cannot be denied that athletics is under the umbrella of institutions, and institutions have highly relied on the external environment. As Lawrence and Ott (2013) said "worsening financial conditions in higher education may have awakened a sleeping bear" (p.145). In 2009, the University of California at Berkeley faced a financial crisis and had to dismiss faculty and staff, while the university still made loans to develop a new football program. Such a situation plus the information gap aroused the faculty's protests (Ledermann, 2009). Similarly, COVID-19 brings pressure and challenges to higher education's budget. During COVID-19, more than 50,000 academic employees were affected by the financial restraint of institutions, either layoff or furlough ("As Covid-19 pummels budgets, colleges are resorting to layoffs and furloughs", 2020). For instance, till July, the University of Akron lost nearly a quarter of faculty after COVID-19 (McLean, 2020), and Ohio University laid off more than 140 faculty and staff which led to employees' protest (Burke, 2020). Considering the characteristics of COVID-19, it is unrealistic to bring all athletes back and hold sports events during the fall semester, so the university can hardly generate revenues from college sports. Thus, under the financial

and safety pressures, the coalition that requires cuts or cost control in college sports would have more power.

Human Resources Frame

Analyzing higher education through the human resources frame, the students and the teachers need the organization to support their education and their ideas. The institution needs the students and teachers for their ideas and their financial assistance such as tuition and fees. The fit between the student body and the university does not work if the university is spending eight times the amount per athletic student. “Annual spending on sports by public non-profit universities in the largest ‘big six’ conferences, has surpassed \$100,000 per athlete” (“Massive spending gap between athletes and academics”, 2018, para 2).

Although they are spending over \$100,000 per athlete, they are still failing to provide student-athletes with an education. Institutions that are creating “paper classes” or “cake classes” are prioritizing their sports over the ultimate goal of higher education: that is to produce effective leaders. The Paper Class Scandal brought to light to the lax grade boosting courses provided for student-athletes. The Literacy Director of Arkansas (Gregory, 2017, para 6) said, “It’s appalling. We’re just exploiting kids. We don’t care if they get an education.” The media uncovered scandals at collegiate schools where juniors and seniors in college read at an eighth-grade level. A study conducted by the University of North Carolina found that 60% of college athletes read between fourth and eighth grade levels. 10% of the athletes read below a third-grade reading level (Ganim, 2014). With the findings of players leaving these institutions without basic, fundamental academic knowledge, academic integrity at Division I football schools appears to be on unstable ground.

The fit between the teachers will not work if the institution is spending over \$100,000 per athlete but treating adjunct teaching as a minimum wage job, higher education will suffer. Sara Matthiesen, an assistant professor at George Washington University stated, “if you think paying someone \$1,500 and no benefits to teach a semester-long course has no impact on the value of your job, you are simply wrong” (Fortin, 2018, para 8). Inadequate pay of teachers can have impacts on the students as well. Schools with higher salaries showed higher test scores, specifically in mathematics and reading (Flanagan & Grissmer, 2006).

Symbolic Frame

Senior business and economics correspondents, Weissmann (2012), calculated only 53% of college teams earned money on football. The real financial crisis is the college sports programs losing money; they are taking resources from academics to pay for sports. There are bigger things in this world to worry about than a sports program that pays for itself. “But when schools are skimping on academics to pay for sports, it becomes a public policy issue-one that is a lot more important than some overzealous fans” (Weissmann, 2012, para 12).

The symbolic frame says institutions use new athletic facilities and equipment to attract current and new members. Stadiums and arenas hold meaning to the student body and their fans. The new buildings and new equipment allow students and fans an anchor for their hopes and beliefs that they will win. In 2014, the Washington Post found that 48 schools spent more than \$770 million on renovations of their athletic facilities. Institutions are in a constant frenzy to recruit the best athletes, and the facilities, coaches, and equipment is a huge part of this (Horne, 2019).

Discussion

Sports in American universities and colleges are in favor of institutions and students from various aspects. Due to the advertising effect, it helps to attract students and donations as well as improve institutional reputations. College athletics is very beneficial for students who would have never had a chance to attend college. No matter the socioeconomic status or race of students, intercollegiate athletics provide equal opportunities for them to be together and obtain common positive experience (Carlson et al., 2020). Also, college sports can benefit students by promoting discipline and improving their cognitive skills and engagement, whereas, such benefits may be weakened by the high-profile and high-priced intercollegiate athletics (Duderstadt, 2000; Gayles & Hu, 2009). For instance, coaches' fat salary may cause a dilemma for the universities to develop suitable football-based strategy and pursue success (Carlson et al., 2020). The issue is not whether sports benefit the students or not, the issue is within the spending on intercollegiate athletics. 2014-2015 *USA Today* reports that 219 of 231 public, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I schools operated at a loss (Alsher, 2016). Such a deficit is funded by institutional budget (Vedder et al., 2010). This leads to more burden to tight budgets and tensions among different departments.

Allen Greene, the Director of Athletics at Auburn argued that athletics actually falls under the education category because students involved in athletics are being taught through sports. He stated that the money spent on athletics is well spent because the fan bases will support the expenses via tickets, concessions, apparel, etc. Yet, due to the coronavirus, athletic directors are realizing subsidizing struggling sports programs are no longer worth it (Nietzel, 2020). With only a max of 20% capacity allowance, ticket, and concession sales will not be able to support the expenses of athletic expenditures (Cobb, 2020). Substantial declines in revenues from

sports do not along with the same level decreases in the expenditures. The problems of overinvesting in sports have been more obvious and serious.

Conclusion

During COVID-19, sports events have been canceled. Most athletics revenues like NCAA contributions, ticket sales, and advertising are restricted, even eliminated, while athletics expenditures do not decrease as much as revenues. Thus, enormous athletics expenditures need support from institutions and students' fees, which further exacerbate tensions between academics and athletics. The tension is mostly attributed to sacred resources, including students' time and energy, and financial resources. The problem is not whether athletics facilitate or obstacle academics, but the efficiency of resources. Structurally, it requires higher education institutions to rethink their core mission and function of athletics departments, then allocate their resources efficiently and integrate different departments. Also, to integrate these two parts, it is necessary to build connections among them. Instead of only regarding athletics as an auxiliary enterprise to generate money, faculty should involve more and take more responsibility. Administrators who charge for budget need to look at the whole picture and evaluate the entirety and departments' efficiency.

From the political frame's perspective, the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 would break some coalition and build some other coalition. Tighter budgets force stakeholders in universities and colleges to rethink their resource allocation. Lay offing employees have already aroused discontent among institutions. Cancelling sports events lead to more financial burden of institutions. Therefore, the power of coalitions to resist cost reduction in athletics would be weakened. It is an opportunity for budget offices to consider the overall efficiency and cost control. Furthermore, not

every university has to cut its sports programs or reduce the same level costs. Each university and college have their own characteristics and strengths. Also, they may stress athletics for different goals. For instance, some less prestigious colleges need sports to attract students. For them, the advertising effect of athletics is more important. Cutting sports programs in those colleges would lose students. They may consider strategies like cutting certain sports that they are not good at or reduce costs on those sports and keep investments on their outstanding sports.

Even with pressure from overzealous fans, higher education institutions need to focus on prioritizing Bolman & Deal's (2017) human resources framework. The ultimate goal of higher education is to produce graduates who will be effective leaders in their chosen profession, valued members of their communities, and responsible citizens of the world. "For many institutions, spending on athletics is sacrosanct, even when academic spending (such as faculty pay and academic programs) is being cut or frozen" (Kiley, 2013, para 6). Higher education institutions cannot produce effective leaders for our world if they are providing paper classes and cutting from academics for athletics.

"The belief that college sports are a financial boom to colleges and universities is generally misguided. More often than not, athletic departments rely on subsidizing athletics. It is apparent that most athletic departments depend on subsidies from universities and student fees to fund their programs. In fact, student fees or institutional subsidies (coming from tuition, state appropriations, endowments, or other revenue-generating activities on campus) often support even the largest NCAA Division I college sports programs" (Desroachers, 2013, para 20).

Higher education institutions need to look at their current mission compared to the values of their institution. By prioritizing sports over teachers and students it appears higher education institutions do not prioritize education.

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