

FLORIDA TAXWATCH

Economic Commentary

A Monthly Publication

AUGUST 2015

Trophies and Transcripts

As the heat of summer begins to abate, and great fall weather draws nearer, excitement around the state starts to build for the kickoff of this year's college football season. This annual ritual of marching bands and fight songs, team colors and stuffed mascots, and tailgates and ticket windows binds students and local communities in a unique way, turning the school pride up to 11.



Florida is home to many of the top college football programs in the nation. In the past decade alone, Florida universities have claimed 3 national championships (two by the University of Florida, and the 2013 title by Florida State University) as well as a handful of bowl victories. This year is no different, with Florida State University starting the season ranked number 8 in the nation in the preseason USA Today Coaches' poll, and 10th in the Associated Press Top 25.

More than just boasting and claiming bragging rights, success on the field can actually affect a school's academic standing off the field. Studies have shown that a school's successful athletic program can have a positive impact on a university's exposure, attracting students to the university, as well as increasing application, retention, and graduation rates. Given these positive impacts, rooting for Florida universities' athletic programs may just be rooting for Florida's academic system.

Increased Exposure

The most obvious way a university's athletic success can benefit the school academically is through increased national exposure. When a school has an exceptional football season, its games are typically moved into national television broadcast slots, sports networks highlight the school, and the school is featured in more articles online and in print media. This grants the university an extraordinary amount of free advertisement, potentially worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

After George Mason University's (GMU) "Cinderella" run to the 2006 Men's Basketball Final Four, Dr. Robert Baker, director of the Center for Sport Management at GMU, studied the value of the school's exposure. Baker found that the university gained an estimated \$677.5 million in free media coverage.¹

In Florida, capitalizing on expanded exposure was brought to the forefront by Dr. Paul Jarley, the dean of the College of Business at the University of Central Florida (UCF). After the success of UCF's 2013 college football season, which culminated in winning the highly respected Fiesta Bowl, Dr. Jarley wrote that UCF needed to "Leverage [the] win to spread [the] word of [UCF's] accomplishments in the classroom and research."² Dr. Jarley went on to write about different ways that alumni and students could use the Fiesta Bowl victory as a vehicle to raise the notoriety of the school, including helping to build the University's presence in major cities around the country.

Attracting More Students

Once a school gains notoriety from athletic success, prospective students take notice. Dr. Baker notes in his study that admission inquiries from prospective students to GMU went up 350 percent, out-of-state applications increased by 40 percent, and total freshmen applications increased by 22 percent after its success in the college basketball tournament.³



1 George Mason University. *The Bussiness of Being Cinderella: Mason Releases Study on Final Four Impact*. <http://eagle.gmu.edu/>.

2 Jarley, Paul. "Leveraging Our Fiesta Bowl Win." <https://pauljarley.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/leveraging-our-fiesta-bowl-win>.

3 George Mason University. *The Bussiness of Being Cinderella: Mason Releases Study on Final Four Impact*. <http://eagle.gmu.edu/>.

A similar study out of the University Of Chicago and Brigham Young University that examined where students choose to send their SAT scores showed that a university that “has a stellar year in basketball or football on average receives up to 10 percent more SAT scores,” meaning more prospective students,⁴ and potentially a more competitive pool of applicants for the school to choose from, which in turn could create a stronger academic profile for the incoming class.

Fostering Academic Success

For a university, more applicants can mean a stronger class, and a stronger class brings greater academic success. This is one factor that may lead to greater retention and graduation rates among universities with strong athletic programs; however, a stronger group of students is not the only key to academic success.

As Dr. Franklin Mixon and Dr. Len Treviño explain in their study *From Kickoff to Commencement: The Positive Role of Intercollegiate Athletics in Higher Education*, a strong athletic program can foster a sense of excitement and pride for students at a university. They assert that this can “help students deal with the psychic costs of leaving home” for the first time, a positive effect that would spill over into the classroom, promoting academic success.⁵

The sense of school pride that comes with athletic success also helps a student feel more connected to a school. This can create an environment where students are less likely to transfer, and more likely to work hard to stay at the university, boosting graduation rates for universities across the state, and increasing the breadth and reach of a school’s alumni network, typically a good measure of the academic reputation of an institution.

Conclusion

College football can have a positive and lasting impact on the academic strength and public perception of universities. As fans across the Sunshine State break out the tailgate grills and don the standout freshman’s jersey in hopes of a national title or major bowl win, they are not just rooting for the players on the field. Prospective students will be watching, and may just see something that they want to be a part of for many years to come.

4 Pope, Devin G., and Jaren C. Pope. “Understanding College Application Decisions: Why College Sports Success Matters.” *Journal of Sports Economics* 15.2 (2012): 107-31. Web. <http://jse.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/05/08/1527002512445569.abstract>

5 Mixon, Franklin G., and Len J. Treviño. “From Kickoff to Commencement: The Positive Role of Intercollegiate Athletics in Higher Education.” *Economics of Education Review* 24.1 (2005): 97-102. Web. http://econpapers.repec.org/article/eeeecoedu/v_3a24_3ay_3a2005_3ai_3a1_3ap_3a97-102.htm

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