

2019 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XVII)

Beyond the Flutie Factor: Why Students Choose to Attend Universities Because of Athletic Success

Farah Ishaq, State University of New York College at Cortland

Jordan Bass, University of Kansas

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“Three wide receivers out to the right...Flutie flushed...throws it down...caught by Boston College! I don’t believe it! It’s a touchdown! The Eagles win it! Unbelievable!” CBS Television announcer Brent Musberger echoes the excitement that one play, a 48-yard, game-winning touchdown pass from Doug Flutie in the 1984 Orange Bowl against the University of Miami, had on a university. These 48-yards not only represented the game-winning touchdown for Boston College, but also paved the way for the “Flutie factor” in higher education and intercollegiate athletics. This effect of intercollegiate athletic success has been commonly believed to indicate the increase in the quantity and quality of applicants to higher education institutions; as it led to a 25% increase in applicants to Boston College the following year (Sperber, 2010). According to Sperber (2010), this media attention, combined with successful athletic programs continue to transcend all else as, “schools like Boston College continue to pursue victory in college sports, pumping millions of dollars into their intercollegiate athletics programs...all in hopes of having a future Flutie moment” (Sperber, 2010, p. 61).

Pope and Pope (2014) found significant increases in SAT scores submitted among applicants based on success at the NCAA Basketball Tournament level (Sweet Sixteen, Final Four, and Championship) and the overall Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) rankings, especially within the African American student population. Furthermore, similar effects were not only seen on the applicant level, but also among overall awareness, media exposure, merchandise sales, and donations. After a 2010 NCAA Tournament upset of top-ranked Kansas, the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) reported a 30% increase in calls to the admissions office, a 268% increase in unique visitors to the university website, and a staggering 1,577% increase in online store sales just days after the March 20th victory (O’Neil, 2010).

Although this effect has been studied, little has been identified as to *why* students choose to attend universities because of athletic success and how universities can utilize athletic success to promote their institution. In previous examinations, simply awareness of the school has been attributed as the main reason for the Flutie factor. As Pope and Pope (2014) speculated, “high school students are likely to have had substantial exposure to major colleges located in their own state. Thus, when a sports team from a college does well, it is likely to cause a larger shift in awareness for out-of-state students than for in-state students” (p. 124).

This phenomenon has significant implications in utilizing athletic success to increase applications, enrollment, retention, and financial success. By qualitatively investigating *why* students attend universities because of academic success, whether due to increased awareness, social bonding, community engagement, or other previously unexplored reasons, the authors will be able to provide more depth to this phenomenon. In an effort to collect higher tuition rates and increase fundraising efforts, these results can help colleges and universities understand the out-of-state student dynamic and their student attendance decisions.

In short, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of why the attractiveness of collegiate athletic success plays a role in the decision to attend a university, how success contributes to the college community and student engagement, and the implications for enrollment management administrators specifically with out-of-state students. This study looked specifically at the case of North Dakota State University (NDSU), which is located in Fargo, North Dakota.

For this study, the authors used NDSU as the setting to examine *why* the Flutie factor exists. This institution was chosen due to the following reasons: (a) its football athletic success, winning the NCAA Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) championships five straight times from 2010-2015, (b) its location is in the fourth least populated state in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), and (c) its location over 600 miles away from Chicago, the nearest major metropolitan area above a population of one million (City-Data, 2016). The location of NDSU is important in understanding the *why* behind the decision of out-of-state students’ decision to attend a university away from population centers and the factors that played a role in the attending NDSU over institutions closer to major metropolitan areas.

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An open-ended survey was sent to first-year students (N=2,503) using a Microsoft Office mail merge with contact information provided by administration at the university via an Excel document. The survey was sent via email to the contact information provided by the enrollment management administration at the university. The survey included a series of demographic questions along with open-ended questions to obtain input on athletic success and its impact on initial awareness, decision to attend, and community engagement. The analysis of open-ended survey data led to the identification of themes relating to awareness, impact of athletic success on attendance, and the role of athletics community and student engagement on campus. Past literature primarily has suggested that the Flutie factor contributes to a level of awareness to the institution, which leads to increased applications (Chung, 2013; Cox & Roden, 2010; Weistrip, 2010); however, these results attempted to go beyond the Flutie factor as NDSU athletics contributed to the respondents' initial awareness of the institution or decision to attend, and played a role in the overall campus environment, community, and student engagement.

As institutions continue to push for increased enrollment and tuition dollars, this study signified the importance of understanding athletic success as an influential role in the collegiate decision-making process. The role athletic success played in enrollment management within this study lays the groundwork for future collaboration among athletic administrators and admission officers to craft strategic marketing plans dictating community and student engagement for not only the students, but also their influencers. Furthermore, these results pointed to Hansen's (2011) research putting athletic success on the same level playing field as more traditional college choice factors, including reputation of programs and the majors that are offered. As administrators continue to search for justification in keeping athletic programs, this study helped identify the influential role of athletic success on enrollment management while helping initiate future strategic admission initiatives involving athletic programs.

References

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