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Ignorance Is Not Bliss Regarding Spending on Athletics

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By [Richard Vedder](#)

Amidst fiscal problems requiring growing austerity in higher education, intercollegiate athletic programs still continue to grow, despite increasing subsidies coming from college/university general funding. What do students think about this?

To answer this question, my colleagues Matt Denhart and David Ridpath (also a professor at Ohio University) surveyed about 1,000 students at Ohio University, which is a member of the Mid-American Conference and is a fairly typical mid-quality state university. Their results, just published by the Center for College Affordability and Productivity (which I direct) in *Ending the Arms Race: A Case Study of Student Athletic Fees*, are very revealing. They find that:

- Most students severely underestimate the amount that their fee payments to the university subsidizes intercollegiate athletics (ICA);
- a majority felt that their were other sorts of extracurricular activities deserving of subsidy support more than ICA (but which, in fact, receive far less support);
- Fewer than 7 percent of respondents felts ICA reputation was “important” or “extremely important” in their enrollment decision—a majority thought it was “extremely unimportant;”
- Over 35 percent of students attend no sporting events, despite having to pay \$765 in fees to support ICA, about 8 percent of their total charges;
- On average, each surveyed student paid indirectly well over \$150 for each athletic event attended.

short, most students are relatively indifferent about sporting events, are ignorant of the costs, and not in favor of as high athletic subsidies as they are being charged. I would suspect if the same questionnaire were given to their parents, the preference to scale down ICA subsidies would be even more pronounced.

The CCAP study will be criticized on two major grounds. First, it is not representative of students at Ohio University, and second, Ohio University is not representative of American higher education in general. The first criticism is largely bogus, I suspect, while the second one may be correct, but the CCAP study points to the need for more research.

My reading of the study suggests the sample selected, while clearly is not random (although all students were invite to participate—not all did), was probably pretty representative of the student body. For example, the typical number of sporting events attended annually for the sample (the mean was about five) seems to be pretty close to that for the student body as a whole. Looking more broadly, the Denhart/Ridpath results are quite consistent with those reported on a similar survey at the University of Toledo, suggesting the findings are probably representative of a broader body of schools than just Ohio U. Still, the study points out the need to explore this at schools where the subsidization of athletics is less (Ohio U. is well above average regarding subsidization of ICA). Denhart and Ridpath want to do this, and I hope funding is secured to allow that to happen.

Two questions arise. Why is this university, and probably others, spending far more on ICA than its customers (and almost certainly their parents, not to mention the school’s faculty) want? Two, what can and should be done about it?

Successful university presidents (in the sense of being popular with high job security) stay in office by raising lots of money and bribing various interest groups—by giving students a low workload and access to booze and sex; giving faculty low teaching loads and the freedom to teach what they want (more or less) for decent pay; and giving alums good success in ICA, along with nice new facilities to visit while on campus. Unfortunately, in their zeal to satisfy one group (alumni and perhaps trustees) with fairly high quality ICA (although ironically, Ohio U.’s success can at best be termed “modest” in recent years), presidents have created increasing unrest with other constituent groups angry about the continued high ICA budgets amidst falling budgets elsewhere in the university and rising costs to students.

With respect to solutions, this is like the arms race during the Cold War. One side is not going to unilaterally disarm. All parties need to sit down and impose limits—maximum size budgets (with accounting procedures uniformly defined), for example. “All parties” could be a grouping as small as the university presidents of a single athletic conference, but more likely would require even bigger disarmament deals—say, involving presidents of all BCS schools, all Division II schools, etc. (The cost explosion is [present](#) at Division II and III schools as well as the Division I institutions, if NCAA statistics are to be believed.)

The worst part of all of this the lack of transparency. Often students, faculty, major donors, etc., are in the dark as to the finances of ICA,

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and even what they are paying. Often this is accompanied by misleading statements by administrators on the alleged benefits of ICA, almost always grossly exaggerated. Increasingly universities are spending large parts of their budgets on things unrelated to the core academic mission. Whether universities should be in the entertainment business (e.g., ICA), food and lodging business, etc., is highly dubious to me. Institutions that focus with a laser beam on one or at most two tasks are more successful, I think, than those trying to be all things to all people. The new CCAP study needs to be replicated by others to strengthen the hand of those wanting athletics disarmament.

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