

# Challenging the “Flutie Factor”: Intercollegiate Sports, Undergraduate Enrollments, and the Neoliberal University

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## Abstract

University policy makers and many outside observers generally believe that highly visible intercollegiate athletic success increases the quantity and quality of prospective student applications, as well as bolstering a school’s financial and academic standing. This is sometimes referred to as the “Flutie Factor” in reference to Boston College quarterback Doug Flutie who led his team to a last-minute 1984 football victory on national television, resulting in an alleged windfall of undergraduate applications and other organizational largess. Using previously untapped data from the 2005 Educational Longitudinal Survey, underanalyzed data from the Art & Science Group, and original data from three universities, this study challenges the conventional wisdom that highly visible and successful intercollegiate sports programs necessarily improve a school’s undergraduate population. We suggest that continued uncritical adherence to empirically problematic ideas like the Flutie Factor reflect a commercialized and corporatized “neoliberal” university, where branding, marketing, and profit maximization trump educational substance. In addition to being empirically suspect, this expensive, neoliberal approach toward sports-based marketing remains strangely unindicted as a contributor to undergraduate education’s skyrocketing cost.

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**Reflexive Statement**

*Our ongoing research and teaching about “sports and society” has led us to reassess some powerful conventional wisdoms about the role of organized sports in higher education. While there may be some personal and social advantages to playing or watching organized intercollegiate sports, these advantages may be exaggerated (as is the overall social appeal of sports), and challenges to them are often obfuscated by the cultural mystique surrounding sports in general. There are numerous problems raised by the status quo of intercollegiate athletics: the diversion of scarce resources away from academics, the privileging of organized sports over other worthwhile extracurricular activities, the increasing financial obstacles to accessing higher education that is partly driven by skyrocketing athletics expenses, and sports’ central role in higher education’s move toward “branding” and other corporatized organizational strategies. These topics are fertile ground for critical, humanistic scholarship, and an excellent opportunity for engaging in public sociology. We hope this exploratory study encourages other serious scholarship that challenges normally taken-for-granted aspects of university policy, especially those concerning intercollegiate athletics.*

**Introduction**

In a November 1984 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) college football game, unheralded Boston College defeated the University of Miami (the defending national champions) 47-45 on a last second “hail mary” pass from 5’ 9” quarterback Doug Flutie to wide receiver Gerard Phelan. Flutie would go on to win that year’s Heisman Trophy as college football’s premier player. It was Boston College’s most successful and visible football season, with a remarkable eight games broadcast on national television. This was just before the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark 1984 ruling went into effect (*NCAA vs. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*), ending the NCAA’s monopoly control over college football broadcasting, and paving the way for an explosion of televised college football on existing networks and a burgeoning cable system. After the 1984 season, observers pointed to subsequent 30 percent increases in Boston College’s applications, thus giving rise to the “Flutie Factor” to explain how successful and visible sports programs benefit an entire university (McClusky 2011). The “Flutie Factor” allegedly went to work a few months later when underdog Villanova University beat heavily favored Georgetown 66-64 for the 1985 NCAA men’s basketball championship. Conventional wisdom claims that this victory put Villanova on the map, transforming it from a

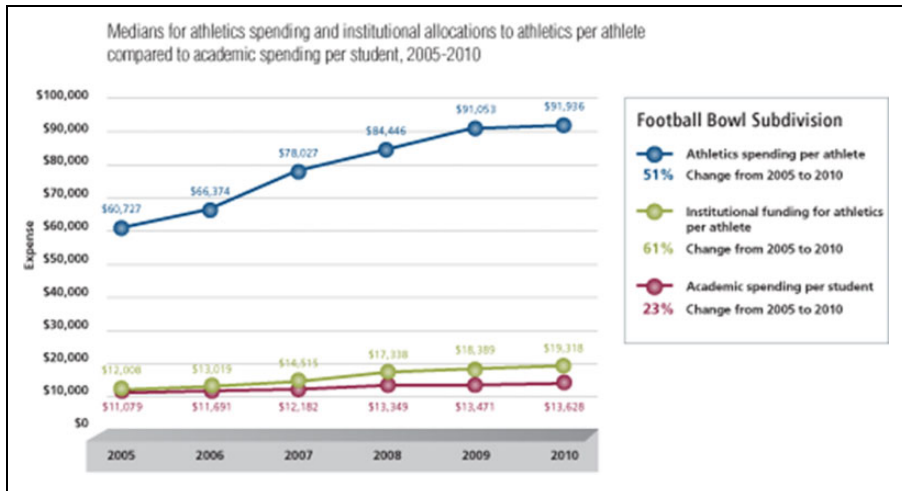
regional commuter school into a national university (Davies 1998). Georgetown itself was supposedly a Flutie Factor beneficiary after a series of NCAA Final Four appearances in the mid-1980s led to a 45 percent increase in undergraduate applications (McEvoy 2005).

The Flutie Factor, or some offshoot, has become a fashionable justification for why colleges and universities should invest limited resources into visible intercollegiate sports. The investment, it is argued, will strengthen the schools “brand,” thus increasing its visibility and appeal to prospective applicants. In addition to more and better undergraduate applications, this increased visibility will allegedly benefit the university financially through larger TV contracts, more lucrative apparel licensing deals, and skyrocketing alumni donations. In this article, we challenge these assertions, especially those referring to the quantity and quality of undergraduate applications and enrollments. Using previously ignored or unpublished national data coupled with original primary data from three universities, we suggest that the positive results of the Flutie Factor are possibly more myth than reality. The continued employment of this approach, even with shaky empirical support, reflects an increasingly corporatized and commercialized university that promulgates policies more concerned with marketing images and profit maximization than with the production and dissemination of knowledge. Colleges considering Flutie Factor-based strategies, such as moving certain sports teams to a more visible (and more expensive) competitive level, should not automatically assume that their potential undergraduate applicants care about this change, or that previously ignorant “consumers” will suddenly become aware of their “product.”<sup>1</sup>

## University Spending Patterns

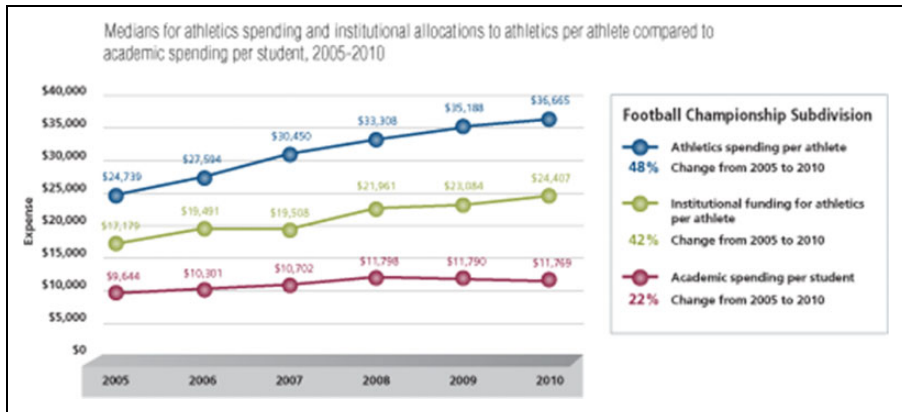
Universities of all shapes and sizes are directing larger portions of their budgets toward intercollegiate sports. While football and men’s basketball have been the main beneficiaries of this spending spree, most sports have shared in the largess (Knight Commission 2012; see also Hurlburt and Kirshstein 2012). Figures 1 and 2 show changes in per student and per athlete spending between 2005 and 2010 in both the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) of the NCAA.

FBS schools are what were once called Division 1-A; schools in the FCS generally play football in what was once called Division 1-AA. The smaller FCS programs have fewer football scholarships, do not participate in the plethora of December and January non-NCAA bowl games, and rarely if ever operate in the black since they do not have lucrative conference-based TV packages like FBS teams. With little actual revenue from football, the smaller FCS schools must rely on a significantly greater proportion of nonathletic budgetary resources to finance these programs (Figure 3). But while football is by far the most expensive intercollegiate sport and accounts for the largest proportion of these expenditure increases, even Division I schools without football programs are engaged in a similar athletics spending “arms race”



**Figure 1.** Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS): athletics spending and institutional funding to athletics growing faster than academic spending.

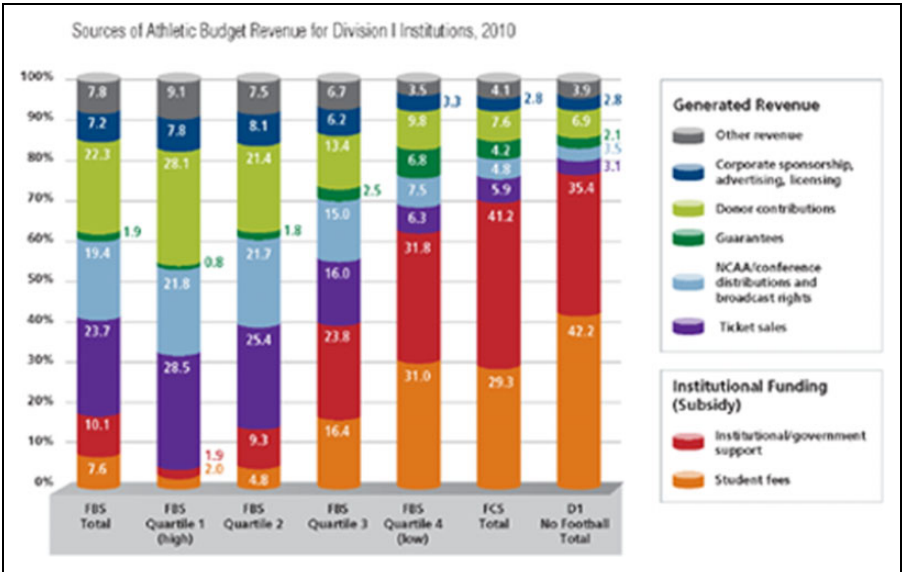
Source: Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.



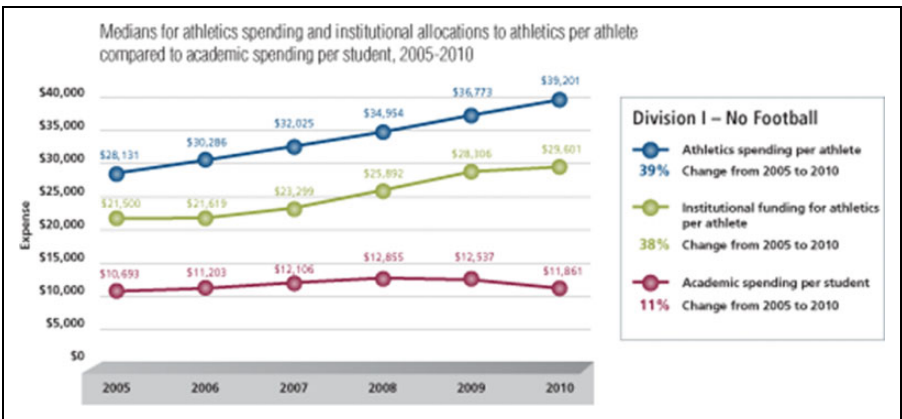
**Figure 2.** Football Championship Subdivision (FCS): athletics spending and institutional funding to athletics growing faster than academic spending.

Source: Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

(Figure 4), as are smaller Division III schools that do not offer official athletic scholarships (Bowen and Levin 2005; Denhart and Ripath 2011; Desrochers 2013; Shulman and Bowen 2002). There has been occasional public and political discussion about the growing gap between institutional spending on athletes and institutional



**Figure 3.** Where the money comes from. . .  
 Source: Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.



**Figure 4.** Division I—No Football: athletics spending and institutional funding to athletics growing faster than spending.  
 Source: Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

spending on students, but this discussion lacks conviction about the strong possible causal relationship between the high cost of college and the spiraling cost of intercollegiate athletics (Pennington 2012).

## The Corporatization of the Academy

As in the larger society, colleges and universities place great emphasis on sports, although the general appeal of sports may be largely exaggerated (Eckstein and Blanchard 2007). This emphasis is evident not only at schools with large, revenue-generating sports programs, but also at schools with more modest programs including so-called premier liberal arts colleges that stress academic excellence and enroll some of the country's best students (Bowen and Levin 2005). The United States is the only country in the world where organized sports have become an institutionalized component of formal higher education (Coakley 2008; Shulman and Bowen 2002:1). Our research is guided by a belief that organized sports in general, and universities in particular, have become increasingly commodified, commercialized, and corporatized, with intercollegiate sports playing a major role in this transformation. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) was one of the earliest to identify the "industrialization of academic life" in post-World War II (WWII) American universities, and this analytical framework has seen a resurgence since the 1990s. While Giroux (2007) was more interested in the militaristic consequences of the corporatized academy, he identified the increasingly "neoliberal" university with top-heavy bureaucracies that ignore educational and civic matters, obsess over profit maximization and market shares, view the "product" of universities as something that needs to be "consumed," and eschew traditional, decentralized, and faculty-based modes of organizational governance.

In this instance, the circulation of [sports] money and power on university campuses mimics its circulation in the corporate world, saturating public spaces and the forms of sociality they encourage with the imperatives of the market. Money from big sports programs also has an enormous influence on shaping agendas within the university that play to their advantage, from the neoliberalized, corporatized commitments of an increasingly ideologically incestuous central administration to the allocation of university funds to support the athletic complex and the transfer of scholarship money to athletes rather than academically qualified, but financially disadvantaged students. (Giroux and Giroux 2012)

Lazerson (2010) identifies the emergence of higher education as a "giant industry" in the late twentieth century, with seismic shifts in the university's balance of power. Key decisions on resource allocation are now made by financial advisors (rather than faculty), who are beholden to neoliberal market principles such as the consumer experience where "it is hard to tell where corporate jargon ends and academic jargon begins" (Gould 2003:98). Administrators of corporatized schools become obsessed with rankings, such as those appearing in *US News and World Report*, and shift their concern from internal educational accountability to managing the impressions of outsiders, with every school trying to outdo each other (Tuchman 2009; see also Tuchman 2010).

Former Harvard University President Derek Bok specifically identifies outlandish intercollegiate sports spending as a “chimera of profitability” within the corporatized university. Spending on athletics “dwarfs the amount made available for community service, orchestras, and theater” (Bok 2003:41; see also Bok 2013). He also warns that intercollegiate sports spending has become ground zero for the competition among universities for market share and that it leads to an unnecessary emphasis on the “beer and circuses” of college life (Sperber 2000). The modern corporate university is not overly concerned with the substance of its educational mission since that is difficult to quantify and would require deference to academic professionals rather than relying on professional managers who draw from business-oriented models that emphasize marketing, visibility, and public image promotion (Gould 2003:31).

### **Corporate University and the Flutie Factor**

Existing research is contradictory on the Flutie Factor’s existence and efficacy. Studies supporting this relationship generally examine the number of applications (quantity) and the standardized test (SAT) scores of applicants (quality) to a school before and after some monumental athletic achievement, such as those mentioned in the introduction (Chressanthis and Grimes 1993; Fisher 2009; Goff 2004; McCormick and Tinsley 1987; McEvoy 2005; Mixon and Hsing 1994; Pope and Pope 2009; Toma and Cross 1998). Notable athletic achievement supposedly contributes to building the “front porch of the university” whereby prospective students might take notice and check out the inside, kind of an academic curb appeal.<sup>2</sup> This is also referred to as the school’s “brand” that is purported to have a positive advertising effect (see Bremmer and Kesselring 1993) and be most effective with prospective customers who live far away from the school in question. Tangentially, there have been assertions that athletic success directly benefits the university financially through increased state subsidies for public universities (Humphreys 2006) and increased alumni donations (Humphreys and Mondello 2007; Mixon and Ressler 1995; Tucker 2004).

There is also a compelling body of work that disputes the widespread institutional benefits which accrue from intercollegiate athletic success (Fisher 2009; Frank 2004; Tucker 2005; Tucker and Amato 2006). While this more critical research also measures application quality using SAT data, it organizes these data within a different analytical model that challenges the positive “advertising effect” of successful sports programs. For one thing, these studies examine long-term SAT trends and application data around high-visibility sporting achievements rather than just for a year or two on either side of these events. These studies document that aggregate SAT increases among applicants are generally short-lived and that other aggregate surges occur independently of visible athletic achievement. Even Doug Chung (2013), who links athletic success with more and better applications, acknowledges that these gains are not permanent and mostly effect lower quality students. In



addition, this more critical research often examines a multitude and variety of schools rather than a single school or schools within one conference or one-state system.<sup>3</sup> Since different types of schools may be drawing from very different student populations, it is dangerous generalizing grandly about prospective student behavior that may, in fact, be institutionally dependent. Finally, there is convincing evidence that sports success moderately increases alumni giving only in DII programs (Turner, Meserve, and Bowen 2001) and may *decrease* alumni contributions in DI private schools (Bowen and Bok 1998). One DI private school vice president asserted, “repeat after me: there is no empirical evidence demonstrating a correlation between athletic achievement and alumni fundraising success” (Shulman and Bowen 2002:233).

We think there are even more serious problems with research supporting the “Flutie Factor,” especially the claims surrounding an increased quantity and quality of undergraduate applications. First, SAT scores are a problematic measure of academic quality because they can reflect things that have nothing to do with academic potential. Since SAT scores are standardized yearly, it is also very difficult to make comparisons except within the group taking the test in any given year. While 85 correct answers one year may receive a 660, the same number of correct answers the following year may receive a 640. These statistical fluctuations have nothing to do with the absolute “quality” of the individual test taker and everything to do with the relative performance of any individual compared to all those taking the same test. Second and far more importantly, research supporting the Flutie Factor’s existence completely begs the question of whether applicants to a school will actually be accepted and, if accepted, will actually enroll. It is quite possible that those who apply because of a suddenly appealing athletic front porch are *less* likely to actually enroll even if they are accepted; or athletic success may simply be irrelevant to enrollment decisions. In short, the entire Flutie Factor model could be grounded in an ecological fallacy: applicants to a school may not attend that school. Those who apply to the school may be a largely irrelevant population. It is possible, maybe even likely, that schools such as those mentioned in the introduction attracted more and better applicants irrespective of any sporting glory that might have been transpiring at the same time. Correlation does not necessarily equal causation. Even one of the pioneering studies of the Flutie Factor acknowledged that sports’ impact on applications was almost impossible to disentangle from other factors such as increased financial aid and more residential opportunities (McCormick and Tinsley 1987).

Indeed, the only way to really know if sports visibility influences application *and* enrollment decisions is to ask those students who have actually enrolled what influenced their decision. This seemingly simple strategy does not seem to be very popular. Even the widely administered Freshman Survey produced by the Higher Education Research Institute does not ask if the school’s intercollegiate sports programs (successful or not) influenced enrollment decisions.<sup>4</sup> This seems odd, given the criticisms of the college athletics “arms race” first highlighted by the Knight Commission (2012) on Intercollegiate Athletics over 10 years ago. As far as we can



tell, the only published analysis of this topic using actual survey data was by The Art & Science Group in 2000. The Art & Science Group provides marketing information to colleges and other nonprofits. In April 2000, the group conducted a national poll of 500+ high school seniors who planned to enroll in a four-year college the following fall.<sup>5</sup> Among other things, the survey found the level and quality of intercollegiate sports was relatively unimportant to these students' college attendance decisions; general awareness of intercollegiate sports was superficial; those whose college decisions were influenced by intercollegiate sports (as nonparticipants) tended to be male and have *lower* SAT scores. This survey of already accepted college students firmly challenges the wisdom of uncritically using sports to brand a school and provides an excellent launch point for further empirical research.

### Current Empirical Study

Our empirical exploration of the Flutie Factor's veracity relies on two sources. The first is a 2005 follow-up to the 2002 Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics. The 2002 ELS was a multilevel, longitudinal study designed to monitor the transition of a national sample of young people in the United States, as they progressed from 10th grade through college and/or into the labor market.<sup>6</sup> There is a single question on the 2005 follow-up survey, answered by roughly 12,000 people, that asks respondents to identify those factors that influenced their decision to attend a certain college. The question does not ask for a ranking of these factors, so respondents can name as many reasons as they want. As far as we can tell, the data on this particular topic have never been analyzed and published.

We also collected original survey and interview data from 427 first-year students at three very different colleges: a large, flagship, state university; a medium-sized, private, comprehensive university that plays Division I sports; and a small, premier liberal arts college that plays Division III sports. Both the large public university (Big State U) and the medium-sized private school (Comprehensive U) have won national championships in several sports. The smaller liberal arts college (Liberal Arts College) won its first national sports championship a few years ago. Big State U, Comprehensive U, and Liberal Arts College accept, respectively, about  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ , and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of their applicants. The surveys were administered through introductory sociology classes either directly or via e-mail. The classes used to reach these students contained almost all first-semester, first-year students with a small number of students in the second semester of their first year. The first-semester students had been randomly assigned to these sections by the registrar and are demographically consistent with each school's overall student population. Second-semester students self-selected into these classes, but their demographic characteristics were indistinguishable from first-semester students, as were their responses to our survey. Thus, these introductory sociology classes provide an adequate, if imperfect, sample of each school's undergraduate student population. Respondents were also asked if they

were willing to be interviewed at a later date. Of those who indicated a willingness to be interviewed, we had personal or e-mail conversations that expanded on their survey responses. These qualitative interviews are not being presented as “data” to support our argument, but simply to highlight some of the more interesting points that our survey uncovered.

While we acknowledge that our survey results may not be generalizable, we maintain that they provide a formidable challenge to an uncritical acceptance of Flutie Factor–based policies. Moreover, the survey has two important twists that increase its usefulness. First, we asked respondents to *rank* (from 1 to 8) those factors that most influenced their college selection. This increased the likelihood that students considered the *relative* importance of each factor rather than quickly claiming that lots of things were equally important or unimportant. Second, we surveyed people who were actually attending the school, eliminating the aforementioned leap of faith which assumes that those who apply to a school will actually enroll. The survey also collected basic demographic data including where people went to high school. We have collected 427 responses from students at these schools, with more responses from the two larger schools. Additionally, we interviewed 21 students from these schools (primarily via e-mail) to flesh out the survey responses. These interviewees were randomly selected from the 119 respondents who indicated (on their surveys) a willingness to speak with us. In addition to asking respondents to rank what influenced their college attendance decision, we asked if their attendance decisions would have been prejudiced, had there been significant differences in existing intercollegiate sports programs, especially the most visible ones. There were a number of other substantive issues we addressed in the survey but are currently focusing only on those concerning the relationship between sports visibility and college application/enrollment.

Since we consider this research exploratory rather than definitive, we oversampled Comprehensive U ( $N = 240$  surveys, 15 interviews) because we consider it the most interesting and important case in terms of athletic branding. In a sense, Comprehensive U is an “ideal type” of those schools that have fully bought into the Flutie Factor, especially the FCS and DII schools that seem especially eager to make certain sports (usually football) more visible. These include but are not limited to schools such as Appalachian State, Butler, Creighton, Georgia State, Liberty, Old Dominion, Quinnipiac (hockey), UNC-Charlotte, UT-San Antonio, University of Southern Alabama, Villanova, Lehigh, Lafayette, Fordham, Bucknell, and many others. While some FBS schools have also made similar expensive football upgrades (e.g., UMass, Rutgers, Temple, and UConn), the smaller FCS schools with their modest budgets have more at stake with their Flutie Factor–driven decisions.<sup>7</sup>

## Data

National ELS data presented in Table 1 indicate that intercollegiate athletics is relatively unimportant to high school seniors making college *attendance* decisions,

**Table 1.** Non-ranked Factors Influencing College Selection (Percent).

	Very Important	Not Important
Desired curriculum	53.2	4.1
Academic reputation	47.7	6.9
Financial aid	46.1	10.9
Social life	24.5	16.5
Student diversity	12.0	40.6
Athletics	11.7	45.7
Legacy	2.4	70.4

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics.

although it may still be important to making *application* decisions. In fact, the only thing less important than intercollegiate athletics is whether the respondent's parent/parents attended the school (i.e., a legacy).

Certain demographic variables impacted the importance of athletics in a student's college selection. Men were more likely than women to use sports as an important selection criterion (14.9 percent vs. 8.7 percent) and blacks were twice as likely as any other racial or ethnic group to think sports was important (20 percent vs. 10 percent). Family income had a clear but unspectacular effect, with higher income students slightly less inclined to name intercollegiate athletics as an important enrollment criterion.

In our original survey, factors were considered "very important" if respondents ranked them first or second of the eight options; they were considered "unimportant" if ranked seventh or eighth. The data from our survey reinforce the national ELS findings while also illuminating some important caveats. On the whole, students consider intercollegiate athletics less important than other things. The patterns between and among the schools are not particularly counterintuitive. Athletics were more important to Big State U students' enrollment decisions than to those attending Comprehensive U; Comprehensive U's students were more concerned with intercollegiate athletics than prospective students at Liberal Arts College. Most interesting, perhaps, is the modest *overall* percentage of students who place high importance on intercollegiate athletics when considering enrollment. Comprehensive U's data are especially telling since, as mentioned earlier, it reflects those schools that seem to be exceedingly enchanted by the Flutie Factor's promise of success.

As with the ELS national data, men were about one-third more likely to say athletics was very important at Big State U (41 percent) and at Comprehensive U (22 percent). We did not collect data on racial or ethnic identification. Regardless of gender, students who eventually attended Comprehensive U and Big State U put moderate importance on intercollegiate athletics' impact on their enrollment, which was quite similar to things like service opportunities, location, and institutional heritage (i.e., religious affiliation, family legacy, and regional popularity). In other words, the presence of intercollegiate athletics was something worth considering but

**Table 2.** Ranked Factors Influencing College Attendance (Percent).

	Comprehensive University (N = 240)		Liberal Arts College (N = 38)		Big State University (N = 149)	
	Very Important	Not Important	Very Important	Not Important	Very Important	Not Important
Academics	68	8	85	0	40	29
Location	32	56	11	44	6	81
Financial Aid	30	20	33	39	9	48
Athletics	18	29	3	93	27	21
Heritage	14	37	17	56	55	34

Note: Not all variables are included in the table.

not necessarily a deal maker or deal breaker. According to one first-year Comprehensive U student,

I'm here for an education. I went to a football game since they gave out free tickets but it was boring and mostly filled with drunk alumni older than my parents. I guess it's good that we have a basketball team but that's not why I came to Comprehensive U. I heard [from my school counselor] that it was academically challenging.

As mentioned briefly earlier, small liberal arts colleges (and Ivy League schools) are not immune from equating successful sports programs with institutional visibility and growth. While these schools do not offer athletic scholarships per se, many of them provide admissions advantages and nondescript financial aid to designated athletes in designated sports (Bowen and Levin 2005). Underlying this affirmative action for athletes (who are not disproportionately poor or dark skinned) is the same assumption operating at larger scholarship schools that visible and successful intercollegiate sports programs attract better students and increase overall institutional quality. Students at the small Liberal Arts College we surveyed (Table 2) were more likely to rank academics as the most significant influence on their enrollment decision and athletics as completely unimportant, again suggesting that policymakers may put more emphasis on the appeal of athletics than do prospective students. A varsity cross-country runner was the one person who said athletics was most important, but other varsity athletes said sports was not important to their enrollment decision.

Liberal Arts College is the best school I applied to. I'm glad I will be able to continue playing soccer here but I would stick around even if soccer was [eliminated]. I don't think soccer helped me get in because I'm not very good. I love playing but it's not important. Nobody comes to the games. They're too busy studying.

We recognize that this particular liberal arts college may be a complete outlier, and that another school would reflect a completely different reality. However, we believe

that this particular school represents the genre pretty well. Further research could certainly make a stronger case one way or the other, but only if scholars and policymakers are willing to concede that the Flutie Factor is not ubiquitously positive.

Elsewhere, we found that significantly downgrading or eliminating Comprehensive U's football program, despite it having recently won a national championship, would have prevented fewer than 10 percent of the respondents from enrolling. This is noteworthy since within the last five years, Comprehensive U considered *upgrading* its football program to the more prestigious FBS level in hopes of taking advantage of the Flutie Factor by increasing its national exposure, sharing in lucrative football-based TV contracts, and energizing its alumni donors. This FBS upgrade did not take place, but that was more by accident than by design. Even men's basketball, which is much more central to Comprehensive U's athletic mission, does not have an unequivocal role in affecting enrollment. While 60 percent of the respondents said the existence of the basketball team was important to their attendance decision, only 19 percent of the respondents said that having a poor basketball team, or having the team play in a less elite conference, would have prevented them from enrolling.

It's fun having a team to cheer for even if they are bad. I might be more excited if the team was playing better but since it's almost impossible to get tickets for on-campus games I don't give it much thought. A couple of my hall mates live and die by the basketball team but most of us are too busy with our schoolwork and going out. But we'll watch the game if it's on, but usually while we're doing our homework.

By contrast, 62 percent of the respondent's at Big State U indicated that they would not have enrolled if there was no big-time football program. This trend held constant regardless of whether the person actually attended or watched the games. Although this was slightly influenced by gender, this influence was not as strong as for the initial enrollment considerations discussed earlier. On the surface, it seems that this result contradicts the more modest assessment of how intercollegiate athletics impacted enrollment decisions at Big State U. However, we think that the incredibly strong football culture at this school creates a stronger allegiance *after* the student arrives. One female student reflected,

I really don't like football and have never thought about going to the games. But there's an excitement around here on Friday nights that my friends at [smaller state schools] don't get to experience. Yes, a lot of it is about drinking but there's also a chance for you to meet people from outside your regular social group [and] I would really miss that excitement if there was no football game.

At the other extreme, students at Liberal Arts College said that eliminating any of the sports teams (there is no football team) would have had absolutely no impact on their enrollment. Even the aforementioned varsity athlete said they would have enrolled if their team did not exist.

**Table 3.** Source of First Contact with Comprehensive University (percent).

Counselor or Teacher	30.1
Family member	24.3
Friends	19.7
Sporting event	16.3
Unsolicited literature	7.1
College fair	2.5

One corollary of the Flutie Factor, as mentioned earlier, is how visible sports is an especially useful front porch for prospective students who live far from campus and who may not have been exposed to any other element of the school. As with many pieces of the Flutie Factor, this seems to make logical sense on the surface. However, the data we collected from Comprehensive U do not support this argument (see Table 3). In fact, they suggest that those from geographically distant areas were *less* likely to make first contact via a visible sporting event.<sup>8</sup> A student who lives thousands of miles from the school said,

I had never seen a Comprehensive U basketball game on TV since I don't watch much sports. My guidance counselor told me about [the school] since I wanted to move away from home and go to a school with a [particular institutional heritage]. She said 'how about Comprehensive U' so I looked into it, it sounded cool, they offered financial aid, and here I am.

Another student from a distant state said he or she had seen Comprehensive U play basketball on TV a few times, but that's not how he or she learned about it or why he or she applied and enrolled. The only respondents who claimed to learn about Comprehensive U through visible sports were those that were intercollegiate athletes. We are highlighting this factor at Comprehensive U since, again, it is the only school in the sample where policy makers overtly claim that *more* highly visible intercollegiate sports contributes to a brand that will be *more* attractive to nonlocal student prospects. We believe this is a common attitude by schools in the Comprehensive U genre. Big State U already has enormous visibility, especially within its state, which provides 78 percent of its enrollees. Liberal Arts College does not claim to use intercollegiate sports visibility to introduce itself to faraway prospects, although that could change. In fact, there are quite a few schools within the liberal arts category that consciously use successful sports programs to develop a "national" presence (Bowen and Levin 2005).

## Discussion

The combination of data from the Art & Science Group, the Education Longitudinal Study, and our original survey should encourage decision makers and scholars to

reconsider the Flutie Factor's validity. Given these data and some of the criticisms raised earlier, we are not convinced that high-visibility sports has a universal impact on college selection decisions, although we acknowledge that it may be sporadically effective at *some* places in *some* situations. Clearly, enrollees at Big State U weigh intercollegiate athletics above the national average reflected in the ELS data while Liberal Arts College enrollees hardly consider it at all. The data from Comprehensive U are more ambiguous. Intercollegiate athletics seems slightly more important to its enrollees than the national average, but this importance is still probably far less than what its administrators believe given some recent decisions.

We are also unconvinced that a school's sports-constructed front porch necessarily influences applications or enrollments, especially when noting the historical context of any visible athletic success. For example, 1980s enrollment increases at Boston College, home of the original Flutie Factor, can be explained by other structural conditions that have nothing to do with high-visibility sports. Boston College had been experiencing significant application increases well before Doug Flutie arrived in Newton, averaging about 15 percent *each year* since the early 1970s, 14 years before Doug Flutie threw his memorable pass (Suggs 2001). This was all part of Boston College's concerted effort to go beyond its roots as a commuter college for Boston-area Catholic students. One of the most important factors contributing to this change was the construction and acquisition of enough residence halls to literally double the number of beds on campus between the early 1970s and the early 1980s. These new dorms increased Boston College's "carrying capacity" and created the possibility for applicants from outside the Boston region.

Much like Boston College, Villanova University's history offers poor support for the Flutie Factor. In the three years *prior* to winning the 1985 NCAA basketball championship, applications to Villanova increased by 19 percent. That basic trend continued throughout the entire decade and actually took a slight *dip* in the year immediately following the 1985 championship before resuming. It seems rather disingenuous to claim that the Flutie Factor, or something like it, was operating at Villanova. Instead, like at BC, Villanova was seeking to grow beyond its roots as a commuter school for Philadelphia-area Catholic students. Residence hall construction was at the heart of this movement since you can't attract more geographically diverse students if they have nowhere to sleep. Longitudinal data from Villanova show a fairly steady application increase over the last 30 years.<sup>9</sup> Unusually strong surges correlate fairly well with new residence hall construction and introduction of the Common Application. These surges are not related to the school's success on the court, the track, or the field.

If there is such sketchy empirical evidence supporting notions like the Flutie Factor, why do colleges and universities continue to shovel resources toward sports visibility and success? Again, we think it is important to recognize institutional uniqueness in assessing these possible reasons. A large state university may have different organizational, political, and economic dynamics than a small liberal arts college, a regional state college, or a religiously affiliated school. Some premier liberal



arts colleges, like those in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), consciously use sports as a central part of their image (see Bowen and Levin 2005), as do many of the medium-sized public and private schools mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, we think there are aspects of invoking the Flutie Factor that may be somewhat universal. For instance, alumni often play a distinct role in “encouraging” schools to spend more on athletics, offering selfless platitudes like the Flutie Factor with its seemingly transparent concern about student quality, rather than a more selfish concern with tailgating parties. Frank (2004) identifies numerous troubles in the financial relationship between schools and alumni, but the intercollegiate sports landscape has changed so much in the last 10 years that more contemporary research is needed. Of course, there is no shortage of anecdotes reflecting how a small but vocal group of former students can hold current university community members hostage over one issue or another. Former students have very different needs than current students, and intercollegiate sports often becomes the centerpiece of this friction.

Beyond alumni influence is the ever-growing power of the mass media to constrain university policy, especially around sports. The recent dizzying realignment of college conferences is driven almost totally by a search for the best football TV contract. This TV money is viewed by some university leaders as a delightful balm that can soothe even the worst financial wounds. All it takes is a little more investment in an intercollegiate team in order to join a conference with a lucrative media package. The extra revenue and notoriety generated will more than balance increased spending on new facilities, seven-figure coaching salaries, public relations squads, and bowl game participation; or so the logic goes, despite overwhelming empirical evidence that all but a few intercollegiate sports programs lose large amounts of money (see Figures 1–4; Fort and Winfree 2013; Knight Commission 2012).<sup>10</sup> There also seems to be notable lack of concern *linking* the skyrocketing cost of attending college with the burgeoning college athletic-industrial complex (see Zirin 2007). Most criticisms of this connection focus on the construction of athletic facilities, regardless of whether they are built for intercollegiate athletes or the general student body (Lubrano 2012; Martin 2012; McCardle 2012). Any interest in the relationship between total cost and athletic spending usually examines how student fees are increasingly used to subsidize intercollegiate athletics, but tend to ignore the complicated web of institutional funding of which student fees are just one component (Berkowitz 2010; Fort and Winfree 2013). Admonitions from the Knight Commission and other similar groups seem to have little impact on national and state policymakers, perhaps because elected officials are deeply embedded in the intercollegiate athletics system, and perhaps because Knight Commission members lack credibility in the eyes of current university administrators. This political component of the college athletic-industrial complex deserves more scholarly consideration and analysis.

Finally, there is a pervasive ideology in the United States rooted in the widespread exaggeration of sports’ importance and benefits. Sports is considered a

magical elixir that can teach kids self-esteem and cooperation, end delinquency, provide school spirit, offer upward mobility to poor people, entertain the masses, and bring communities and societies together in a form of organic solidarity that Emile Durkheim could only dream about.<sup>11</sup> The ideology of sports' social benefits drowns out contrasting beliefs that sports can also be harmful or that the positives and negatives of organized sports are an open question subject to empirical analysis. In terms of the ongoing discussion about phenomena such as the Flutie Factor, critics must do more than just make a solid scientific argument. They also have to fight the dominant ideological current which insists (even when faced with contrasting evidence) that sports is an inherently positive social force. This upstream battle is similar to social scientific challenges about the community wonders of publicly subsidized stadiums and publicly subsidized mega-sports events like the Super Bowl and Olympics. Despite mountains of economic and sociological evidence that these stadiums and events are *not* economic development engines, policymakers and the mainstream media continue to support them on the seemingly nonfalsifiable belief that, since it involves sports events that attract vast numbers of people, it just *has* to stimulate the local economy.

## Conclusion

It is not surprising that university administrators exaggerate the Flutie Factor's efficacy, given the increasingly commercialized and corporatized world of intercollegiate sports (specifically) and higher education (generally). The glitz, glamour, and alleged profitability of high-visibility sports merge seamlessly with the growing neo-liberal emphasis on branding, image, and mass consumption. This trend is fueled by seasoned alumni who view their alma mater primarily as a source of entertainment, and by media pundits and their corporate overseers who have a vested economic interest in expanding and legitimating the athletic-industrial complex, especially if schools are willing to pay the cost of this expansion.

Recent policy changes in the DI Patriot League provide an excellent example of this phenomenon. In 2012, the Patriot League allowed each of its schools 15 athletic football scholarships, with another 15 permitted in subsequent years until reaching a total of 60 in 2015. The Patriot League has always been an anomaly within Division I since its relatively small schools did not offer athletic scholarships for football, and only introduced scholarships for other sports after 1998 (Brutlag-Hosick 2012; *Fox Sports News* 2013). Most of the overt justification for this significant policy change concerns the ability to attract a more "middle-class" athlete who might not qualify for need-based aid at the school, even though schools without designated athletic scholarships have found creative ways to equate athleticism with "need" (Bowen and Levin 2005). A more subtle justification has been the assumption that more successful football programs will have a better chance at qualifying for and advancing through the FCS playoffs, delivering hours of free TV advertisement for the schools and "putting them on the map." Schools within the Patriot League have not

universally embraced this change, with Georgetown seeming especially reluctant and Fordham especially supportive.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, while Fordham alone began offering football scholarships in 2011, its 2012 team finished the season with roughly the same record as Georgetown which offered no scholarships.<sup>13</sup> While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, it does not appear that offering scholarships provides an instantaneous boost to a program, much less improving a school's visibility and desirability to legions of brilliant and athletically talented high school students who remain unaware of schools such as Bucknell, Lehigh, and Lafayette.

In addition to simply not working, attempting to increase a school's visibility via a successful sports program, as in the Patriot League, has other serious latent consequences. First, it is far more expensive than (for instance) increasing a school's academic profile. Head football coaches cost more than professors and a typical team will also carry six or seven assistant coaches, utilize specialized trainers and conditioners, and require more administrative resources to coordinate publicity and travel. There are also the Title IX requirements that will force schools to add female athletic scholarships (or entirely new teams) to balance additional football scholarships and expenses. Second, these sports-centered policies may actually jeopardize a school's academic-based image. Patriot League schools, for example, have always heralded that they did not give football scholarships *per se*; that they were philosophical and academic equals to the Ivy League schools, only without the ivy. These neoliberal marketing strategies are not limited to expensive private colleges although, as mentioned earlier, such schools (like Comprehensive U) seem especially susceptible to the songs of these Flutie Factor sirens. Public universities are also following this path despite unconvincing evidence that it will lead to success.

Our research suggests that schools such as those in the Patriot League take a big financial and organizational risk by investing in more visible sports programs. Certain schools may indeed benefit from such a strategy, but many more probably will not. After all, only one or two Patriot League school will qualify for the FCS playoffs despite all seven making this multimillion dollar expenditure. Universities must ground their decisions in actual empirical data rather than in blind adherence to market-based myths about the magic of sports. We are also skeptical about the Knight Commission's (2012) ongoing optimism that giving university presidents more direct control over athletic administrators will somehow tame the high-visibility sports marketing machine. There are ample stories about college presidents who are completely in step with (or responsible for) the corporatized university's goals and methods, and who give athletic administrators *carte blanche* to use any means necessary to raise the school's visibility (Benedict and Keteyian 2013; Clotfelter 2011; Smith 2011). Indeed, university presidents are increasingly being drawn from corporate rather than academic backgrounds (see Hammond 2013). We need to look no farther than Penn State, Oklahoma State, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Miami to see what can happen when schools blindly insist that all will benefit from more visible and successful intercollegiate sports. The overemphasis on sports-based branding leads universities to stray from their educational and

democratic mission, while reflecting an immunity to the plight of students who face a harsh new world of high unemployment, the prospect of downward mobility and debilitating debt (Giroux 2013). We find it disconcerting that, in the raging popular indictments about high college costs and skyrocketing student loans, sports-based folklore such as the Flutie Factor continue to get a free pass.

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### Notes

1. We make no claims to “prove” that the Flutie Factor does not exist. Rather, we consider our research to be an empirically based warning that schools are ill advised to blindly and uncritically jump on to the Flutie Factor bandwagon.
2. Popular and academic reports are awash with the term “front porch of the university,” but we are unable to locate its initial origin.
3. For instance, Perez (2012) only examined application trends at California State University schools.
4. The survey does ask if being recruited *as* an athlete influenced any enrollment decision. Not surprisingly, it does matter.
5. See [http://www.artsci.com/studentpoll/archivedissues/4\\_4.pdf](http://www.artsci.com/studentpoll/archivedissues/4_4.pdf).
6. See <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/els2002/index.asp>.
7. Hofstra University and Northeastern University are notable exceptions in this category as they both have significantly reduced their expenditures on intercollegiate athletics. Much smaller Spellman College has recently eliminated its intercollegiate sports program.
8. Small cell size prevents us from making a bold statistical assertion about this.
9. Many thanks to Villanova’s enrollment management office for this information.
10. Teams playing in bowl games usually lose money (Eichelberger 2010; Pennington 2012)!
11. In fact, Durkheim would probably not endorse sports as a conduit of organic solidarity.
12. Georgetown is an associate member of the Patriot League just for football.
13. Because it chose to offer scholarships starting in 2011, Fordham’s football team was ineligible for the Patriot League championship in 2012 and 2013. It did, however, have an extremely strong 2013 regular season.

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