

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Judah, Kyle (2010) "NCAA Championships are Changing the Game of College Admissions," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jasm0206lq>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol2/iss1/8>

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NCAA Championships are Changing the Game of College Admissions

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For a number of years, the role of athletics within higher education has been a contentious topic, especially these last few years with high profile scandals at Memphis (Derrick Rose), University of Southern California (O.J. Mayo and Reggie Bush) and virtually every sports program at Florida State University. This issue has been thrust in to the spotlight again with so many public University systems facing the most severe budget cuts in their history. The University of California System, encompassing 9 undergraduate campuses and home to illustrious PAC 10 sports programs at UCLA and UC Berkeley, is facing a \$753 Million budget shortfall for the coming year[1]. This can lead to rather heated debates on whether to invest funds into building new stadiums or to improve a school's academic facilities, and the ethics of increasing student

tuition to cover those costs, especially with news released recently confirming that all the UC schools will hike tuition costs by 32%[2]. This prompted student protests outside of the UC Regents Meetings, but on the other side of the Bay Area, thousands of Cal Football fans cheered on their team to an upset of #17 ranked Stanford University. A report was recently released from the Knight Commission and published in the L.A. Times that 85% of top administrators at College Football Bowl Subdivision schools believe that football and basketball coaches receive excessive compensation[3]. Hearing this we can certainly tell that there are big changes to come.

There are definitely exceptions to Athletics Programs that are fiscal sinkholes, with the University of Texas generating nearly \$20 Million in profits for their \$100 Million



[HTTP://WWW.THESPORTSBUSINESSEXCHANGE.COM](http://www.thesportsbusinessexchange.com)

athletics budget[4]. However, the financial impact of a college's athletics program, and their success, cannot merely be measured in the revenues generated by ticket sales and licensing agreements through the Athletics Department. In addition to the dollars and cents, a school's athletics program creates a bevy of additional benefits like creating a united rallying front amongst the student body, increased alumni donations and it can also lead to increased ethnic and geographic diversity in the student body. One aspect that I believe to be overlooked most often is the impact that a successful athletic program can have on a school's number of applications, as well as the quality of prospective student they are able to recruit. By looking at the historical data for college programs that have recently won BCS Football National Championships and NCAA Basketball championships, we're able to see the impact that the success of a sports program is able to have on number of applications received as well as the selectivity of the administration.

Jaren Pope, assistant professor of agricultural and applied economics at Virginia Tech, conducted a similar study in 2007 with his brother Devin Pope, an assistant professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Using the 330 universities falling under Division 1 NCAA Sports, they examined data from 1983 to 2002 on application numbers and applicant SAT testing scores. What they found is startling, with a championship season resulting in a 7-8% increase in the number of applications received for the following year[5].

Examining the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, who recently won the NCAA Basketball Championship in March of 2009, we can see an increase in number of applications since 2008 by 2,957, or 15%[6]. The UNC Tarheels were featured in 23 nationally televised games[7] over the course of their 2008-2009 season, resulting in approximately 46 hours of live national television coverage and hundreds more on highlights shows like Sportscenter. I think it is relatively conservative to say that Pope's suggested 7.5% is due to this additional success and exposure. This would result in half the new applications, or 1,478 additional applications, generating \$103,460 in application fees. According to the University of North Carolina Admissions website, they admitted 32% of applicants, or 473 students, with 54% enrolling, or 255 students. Tuition for an in state student is \$17,424, and for out of state students, it costs \$35,740 every year[8]. Enrolling 84% in state students[9] would equal 214 in state students paying \$3,728,736 and 41 out of state students paying \$1,465,340 every year, resulting in \$5,194,076 in revenues every year...derived solely from their athletic success.

This on field success doesn't just translate to an increase in the raw number of applicants. If

APPLICATION BOOSTS FOR TOPS IN SPORTS			
 NCAA Men's Basketball: Championship Tournament Success and % Increase in Student Applications (Next Year)		 NCAA Football: Bowl Championship Series Success and % Increase in Student Applications (Next Year)	
Make the tournament	1%	Make the Top 20	2.5%
Make the Sweet 16	3	Make the Top 10	3
Make the Final Four	4-5	Win the championship	7-8
Win the championship	7-8	Source: "The Impact of College Sports Success on the Quantity and Quality of Student Applications," Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech	

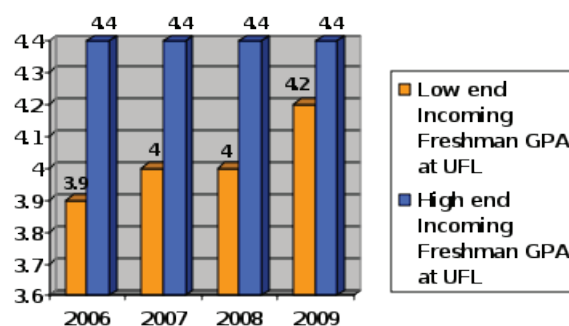
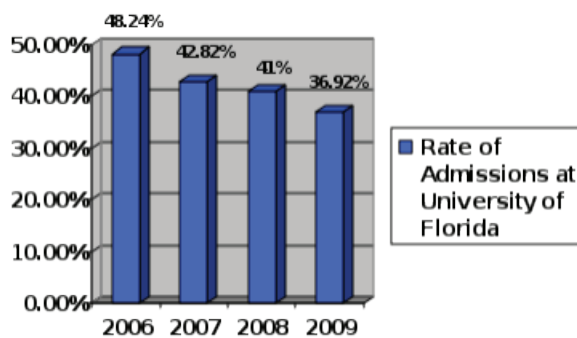
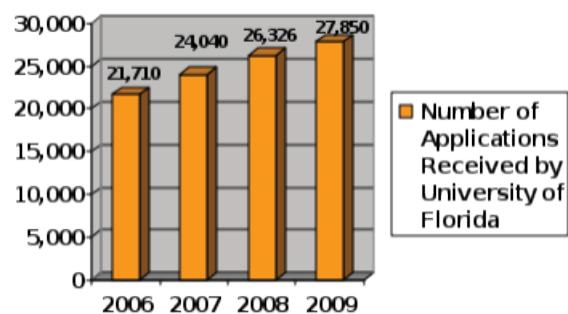
Image Courtesy of University Business Magazine

we take the recent and unique example of the University of Florida, and their dual success in both Football and Basketball since 2006, we are able to see even greater growth. With both the Football and Basketball teams winning the National Championship in 2006, we're able to see a nearly 11% increase in the number of applications received, boosting their total to over 24,000[10]. Seeing such an increase in the course of one year, the University of Florida was able to become more selective, accepting 6% fewer students than the previous year. This selectivity also allowed The Office of Admissions to increase the quality of their incoming freshmen students, raising the average GPA and SAT scores of their admitted students.

The University of Florida has experienced neither short lived athletic success nor a drop in the number of applications received or the quality of the prospective students. By continuing their success and achieving a second consecutive NCAA Basketball Championship in 2007, the University of Florida was able to increase the number of their applications to the class of 2008 to a record 26,325, or a 9.5% boost. Sticking with Pope's assertion that winning a championship generates a 7.5% increase in applications, The University of Florida's victory would be responsible for 79% of the 2,286 new applicants, or 1,805 prospective students. While the average GPA and SAT scores for the class of 2008 remained the same, the Rate of Admission was decreased again, this time by 1.82%. Most recently, we can study the effect of the University of Florida's BCS Football National Championship in 2008 upon the number and quality of students applying for the Freshman Class of 2009. Year to year we can see an increase in applications of 1,524, or 6%. More importantly than the raw number of applicants, the Office of Admissions was once again able to increase the quality of their admitted students, becoming

increasingly selective and increasing the average GPA of their admitted students. If we inspect the numbers closely, we can see the diminishing returns of the University's media exposure kick in, shrinking the total applicant growth from 11% to 6.5% over 3 years. I believe the slowing growth of the increase in applicants is due to the University of Florida reaching the market saturation point for media exposure. Most of their games are already featured on national broadcast, so winning yet another championship can't increase the amount of exposure to prospective students. However, looking over the 3 year period from 2006-2009, we can see the cumulative increase in selectivity was slightly fewer than 12%, with a boost of 0.3 in Average GPA. This, corresponding with a 28% increase in the number of applications, just goes to show the effect of having a Championship caliber athletics program when promoting the school to prospective students.

I reached out to Brett Meador, now an admissions counselor at his alma mater of Louisiana State University. Having experienced the LSU Football NCAA Championship during his senior year, and then beginning to recruit students soon after, he felt like more students knew about LSU because of their football team. "For us at LSU, a successful Athletic program helps Admission recruiting in that it increases our visibility to a national level," said Brett. He mentioned that the trick is use the athletics to capture prospective students' attention, but to have them truly connect with the academics at the school. This creates a hook and lure situation, with athletics being the bright, shiny lure to attract the prospective students (and increasing applications), while the academics are the hook for students (increasing the quality of the student). Brett also noted that the big positive for the University was that he saw was a much more diverse applicant pool than they had previously experienced. You would be hard pressed to find an admissions



department in this country that isn't looking for a greater diversity amongst their students – both ethnically and geographically. This is an incredibly import aspect for LSU, University of Florida and many other state schools facing budget cuts of 20-30% and forcing them to seek an increased number of out of state students, and their higher tuition rates, to help soften this blow. University of California Berkeley Chancellor Robert Birgeneau recently told Matt Krupnik of the Contra Costa Times

that because of these cuts they would be seeking to increase the number of out of state students at Cal from their current 5% ratio[11].

Exploring the evidence presented by Jared Pope, and through my own empirical and anecdotal evidence, we can see the direct correlation between an athletic program's success and the increase in admissions numbers and standards. University budgets will continue to shrink in the coming years, and with that there will be increasing scrutiny on how these limited funds are spent, providing more fuel for this debate. However, we cannot deny the evidence – a successful sports program can change the admissions and recruiting game, creating a boon of new prospects for admissions counselors. Shockingly it is sports, the traditionally fiscal black hole, than can be one of the greatest assets to schools seeking to overcome their crippled budgets.

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