

# *The Controversy of Intercollegiate Sports*

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**Abstract:** Intercollegiate sports have been around for hundreds of years. Today, intercollegiate sports play a huge part in many college campuses across the world. Sports not only bring the campus together, but the community as well. Some believe that sports are more prominent in deciding where to attend college than the academic aspect of the school. However, the controversy lies in whether the universities should realign their focus on marketing themselves as highly accredited institutions or market the high rank of their winning sports records attracting the top athletes and coaches. The discrepancy comes from the many different benefits and costs of focusing solely on the athletic part of an institution. The institutions need to focus on what the mission and overall goal of their school is in order to reach a conclusion. Although prominent Big Ten schools, much like the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, seem to be very influential to the intercollegiate world, the benefits as well as the costs must be taken into account when thinking about the institution as a whole.

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## **I. Introduction**

Universities are in a constant debate regarding whether or not “brain” is more important than “brawn.” Football quarterback Cardale Jones clearly has a position on this issue, stating that football is more important than education (Weissmann, 2015). This instance shows why numerous individuals debate and discuss the meaning and purpose of college athletics and the student athletes themselves. Many college universities choose to advertise and market themselves heavily as either an athletic or academic school. There are often two ways that individuals recognize a campus or university: their impeccable academic reputation or their terrific athletic achievements. For example, the Harvard School of Business is a strongly accredited academic institution much like the other Ivy League schools. Children and students are taught at a young age that these institutions are the highest goals for success in the world of academia. On the other hand, the Big 10 schools such as the University of Wisconsin or Ohio State are highly accredited for their athletic accomplishments. Both types of universities strategically market and aim for the publicity in which they want surrounding their institution.

Given this internal battle of being known for brains or brawn, there are also battles of what reputation the institutions will receive. The schools not only have to focus on their overall reputation, but they need to focus on what the goals and objectives of the institution really are.

Contrary to the popular belief surrounding Big Ten schools, the mission of these institutions is much like that of schools that focus strictly on their academic goals. When looking at the mission statements of two schools on the total opposite ends of the spectrum in regards to athletics, many will be surprised to know just how similar their overall goals really are.

This paper analyzes the many different advantages and disadvantages of a university with a prominent sports team such as a Big Ten school. High admission levels and various other types of attractions create the big hype and positive aspects surrounding Big Ten schools. This article also further examines the gross and net revenues that are brought in to these types of institutions, examining as well the community involvement that the teams put forth. This paper additionally assesses the different consequences these institutions have on the student athletes themselves.

After further researching into the overall costs and benefits of college athletics, this article moves to assess the question of whether an institution such as the University of Minnesota Twin Cities should invest as heavily in athletics as it currently does. Ultimately, this article's real question is whether or not Big Ten schools need to focus on their overall mission as an academic institution or their goals as an athletic program.

## **II. Benefits**

One of the very immense benefits that comes from being a well-known athletic school, such as the schools in the Big Ten, is the high admission levels for first year students. An obvious goal of each and every institution is to attract new students each year. This being said, one of the main benefits from a winning big time intercollegiate sports program is an increase in the enrollment of first year students (Chressanthi & Grimes, 1993). This increase in admissions comes along with a successful program. Overall, this has a huge impact on the institution because it deals directly with the number of students attending and paying for costs at the university.

There is a noticeable amount of attraction to high performing sports teams. However, there is another aspect that results in an increase in admissions for the school. This aspect deals with the student athletes themselves. Many people forget that student athletes are as much a part of the university as are non-athletic students. Even at smaller NCAA Division III schools, it is not unusual for 25 to 35 percent of new freshman or transfers to participate in athletics (Kurz, 2007). This being said, many schools raise their attendance by recruiting and finding more student athletes to propel their programs even further. The student athletes not only bring their athletic skills to the institution, they are also students who bring up the number of admissions to the university.

In addition to attracting new students and players, the prominent intercollegiate sports teams attract the community as well. Many fans purchase season tickets and attend every single game in order to show their pride for the school or state. Intercollegiate sports give the community an opportunity to come together to cheer and push for one common goal. There is no easy way for a community to come together to celebrate the academic side of the institution in

which they support; therefore, sports teams create an outlet in which fans and the community are able to celebrate and show their pride for the school they love.

The community supports and surrounds the team, just as the team supports the community as well. The University of Minnesota Duluth provides an example of this. The student athletes participated in a combined effort of over 1,000 hours of community service and involvement last year in 2014 (Berlo, 2015). This shows that even in smaller, less prominent intercollegiate sports programs, the community is heavily involved with the team just as the team supports the community.

Another huge benefit that often comes along with being a part of the Big Ten program is the revenue. The Big Ten league schools are said to earn approximately \$21 million per year (Fornelli, 2014-2015). This is a substantial amount of money for an extracurricular event held by the universities. This source of revenue is what many people believe to be very beneficial. Not only do the schools bring this amount of money in annually, the Big Ten projects that its revenues will continue to grow each year, and with a new television deal on the way, the conference expects 12 of its 14 schools to bring in roughly \$44.5 million during the 2017-18 school year (Fornelli, 2014-2015). These large amounts of money make the Big Ten program very favorable in the eyes of many supporters.

## **III. Costs**

Despite these many beneficial factors of being a part of the Big Ten and having a prominent sports program, there are many downfalls to holding this high standard of athletic involvement. One issue is the success of the student athlete after their glory days are long gone. In prominent Big Ten programs across the country, much is asked of a student athlete. Many student athletes carry the mindset that their primary academic goal is to "just pass" (Cosh & Tully, 2014). This mindset that many athletes have strays away from what is expected of an average student when attending a university. Many wonder if being a college athlete is worth it: in a sense, student athletes sacrifice their educations toward future careers because of their minor involvement in academics. Athletes have little time to pursue a

competitive degree; therefore, many student athletes achieve degrees that are less notable or worthy to get them a job after college (Rheenen, 2013). The president of the University of Michigan affirms this belief stating, “Some universities take advantage of their student athletes, exploiting their athletic talents for financial gain and public visibility, and tolerating low graduation rates and meaningless degrees in majors like general studies or recreational life” (Van Rheenen, 2013). This creates much criticism from many people who feel athletics have become more important to a university than academics. It seems that the main goal for a student athlete should be to graduate college with a degree. Because many student athletes pursue degrees in meaningless fields, they may not find a stable job after graduation. Despite the rising tuition and the student loan debt levels, the many long-term benefits of earning a college degree are growing substantially. Workers who earn a college degree earn much more and are less likely to be unemployed than those with just a high school diploma (Van Rheenen, 2013).

The Big Ten schools invoke many dreams in student athletes that may never become a reality. Many of these athletes hope to make the leap into the professional sports. They sacrifice their education and their social life to possibly become a professional. However, there is a harsh reality that only a very slim number of collegiate athletes make it to the next level. Only one sport (baseball) had more than 2% of a probability that their players would go on to play professional out of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Manfred, 2012). In the reality of a vast number of student athletes, they should be focusing first on their grades and secondly on their athletics.

Another problem with huge intercollegiate sports programs is that the cost is much greater than most people realize. The amount of revenue that intercollegiate programs bring in can be deceiving. If a sports team wants to compete at the highest level, it will cost that team substantial amounts of money to bring it to the next level (Goral 2014). Only 23 out of 228 Division 1 programs could cover their costs without subsidies. Interestingly, 16 of the 23 schools still got subsidies (Goral 2014). This shows how even some of the biggest athletic programs in the country still are not able to generate enough gross revenue to

be profitable in the long run. One of the purposes of having collegiate sports teams is to create revenue for the schools themselves. If the teams are not creating the revenue needed, many feel that the universities should be putting more emphasis on academics.

#### **IV. Mission and Awareness**

Whether or not a school should invest in intercollegiate sports, therefore, does not have a clear-cut answer. Each school must analyze and weigh the costs and the benefits compared to the mission statement and various goals of the university. The University of Minnesota Twins Cities is one of the fourteen schools a part of the Big Ten division. The school has been part of the Big Ten since 1896 (“About”, 2015). This program is the oldest Division 1 college athletic conference in the nation (UMTC, 2014-2015). Being a part of the Big Ten allows the university to create vast awareness in audiences beyond Minnesota. With the school size being 52,557 people, the University of Minnesota Twins Cities has a large fan base (“About”, 2015). Yet, being a part of the Big Ten adds pressure that may go unnoticed. Although the sports program brings in awareness and admissions for the school, the university itself may be straying away from the mission that was originally created for the institution as a whole. The question remains as to whether or not these benefits outweigh the costs, especially considering the University of Minnesota’s goals.

The mission statement of the University of Minnesota Twin Cities reads, “We are Minnesota’s research university. We change lives—through research, education, and outreach” (UMTC, 2014-2015). This statement does not speak of the university’s athletic program or goals; it only speaks to the school’s academic goals and ambitions. When comparing this mission statement to the mission of Yale University, an Ivy League school, anyone sees that they are remarkably similar: “Like all great research universities, Yale has a three-fold mission: to create, preserve, and disseminate knowledge” (Yale University 2015). While Ivy League schools are successful in achieving their missions, Big Ten schools often are not. Most Ivy League schools are known for their pristine and intense academic programs. The average acceptance rate for Ivy League schools in 2015 was a mere 9.9% (Dell 2011).

This being said, many of these schools do not have to advertise or market to show that they are the best of the best academically. These schools find a way to market themselves to the largest number of possible prospects. On the other hand, schools such as those in the Big Ten have to find other ways to attract students, and these schools often decide to use the athletic world to promote this attraction. However, if the attraction detracts from the mission, the whole purpose of having a university is called into question. Therefore, the Big Ten schools such as the University of Minnesota may need to readjust their marketing intentions and focus more on what the institution is all about rather than their popular sports team.

This being said, marketers need to consider the mission of the school itself. A school can easily market for their successful sports team. However, a prominent sports program may struggle more in marketing for their academics. This goes to show that, even though the emphasis may seem to be on the athletics, the real mission of the University of Minnesota Twin Cities is to strive and change lives through their research, education, and outreach.

One core value of the mission statement at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities is research: "We seek new knowledge that can change how we all work and live. At the University of Minnesota, students do research alongside top professors in all majors" (UMTC 2014-2015). Research is a huge part of the experience and knowledge that one gains from an institution. The University of Minnesota's focus on intercollegiate sports does not benefit the University's research goals.

The second value that the University of Minnesota focuses on is their education. This focus is vastly similar to every institution's across the world, whether it is a smaller community college, a state school, or an Ivy League school. Education is the main reason why schools exist. They do not solely exist to host or have a sports team; they exist so that individuals may further their knowledge and better prepare themselves for a future career. For example, the University's statement, "We prepare students to meet the great challenges facing our state, our nation, and our world," does not allude to sports at all (UMTC 2014-2015). The University of Minnesota Twin Cities wants its education to prepare students for anything that life throws at them. However,

the many athletes who focus on just getting by educationally are not getting this preparation. Their time and effort is mainly put towards their sport. These attitudes and goals do not fully align with the overall mission of the school.

The final part of the mission for the University of Minnesota Twin Cities is outreach: "We apply our expertise to meet the needs of Minnesota, our nation, and the world. We partner with communities across Minnesota to engage our students, faculty, and staff in addressing society's most pressing issues" (UMTC, 2014-2015). While intercollegiate sports give and gain a certain amount of outreach through publicity and the different main events people attend, this type of outreach is not ideal outreach. The ideal outreach of their mission is to engage the students in the community on pressing issues such as the environment and the economy.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Intercollegiate sports will always be a topic of debate. Whether the controversy is dealing with the athletes, the revenue, or the institutions themselves, many issues remain to be resolved. The main controversy lies in whether a school benefits more from their athletics or their academics. Although athletics are a major and prominent part in many schools, particularly the Big Ten, more focus should be on academics for the athletes and institution as a whole. Research needs to continue to further look into the success rate of former college athletes to decipher if the time and effort they put into their sport took away from or added to their college degrees and experience. After researching and analyzing the different goals of the University of Minnesota Twin Cities' academics and athletics, this article found that the athletic programs fail to align with the University's mission and goals. Although prominent sports programs may be well known and liked, many people forget that the main purpose for an academic institution is to provide students with an education and experience they can bring into a future career. This being said, the University of Minnesota Twin Cities' focus should be first on academics and second on its athletic program. By doing so, the University will better work towards its mission, creating a new atmosphere that other large athletic schools have not yet experienced.

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