The Effects of Increased Intercollegiate Athletic Success on Undergraduate Applications for Admission

A Study on Appalachian State University

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of increased collegiate athletic success on the undergraduate application rate of admission to Appalachian State University. During the 2006-2007 NCAA basketball season, the Appalachian Mountaineers picked up notable wins against Virginia, Vanderbilt, Davidson, and the College of Charleston, in a season in which Appalachian made its debut in the National Invitational Tournament (NIT). The NIT berth was a milestone in Appalachian Athletic history and the basketball team was well noted throughout various media outlets all over the country for a successful season. In 2005 and 2006, the Appalachian State Mountaineer football team won back-to-back Football Championship Series (FCS) National Championship’s and as a result, the team and the University received an enormous increase in media exposure and publicity. On September 1, 2007, the Mountaineers (#1 FCS) would continue their winning streak by defeating the Michigan Wolverines (#5 FBS) in the season opener for both teams in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The win was the first FCS win in the history of college football where a FCS team defeated a nationally ranked Football Bowl Series (FBS) team. Appalachian State University received a tremendous amount of media coverage following this historic win.

This study examines the relationship between the increase of intercollegiate athletic success and undergraduate admissions applications at Appalachian State University. It is interesting to note how and if this increased athletic success influenced the amount of applications received for undergraduate admission at Appalachian. This study involved 75 random surveys of current freshmen at Appalachian to see if any of these students applied for admission concerning reasons of athletic success. Of this group, approximately 25% agreed that the success of the athletic programs at ASU influenced them to apply for undergraduate
admission. When looking at the success of the men’s basketball team and the football team, approximately 23% felt that these teams influenced their decision to apply for admission, and 24% more actively pursued admission to Appalachian as a result of the increase in athletic success of ASU’s teams. I will relate these percentages with other statistics and data from Appalachian’s Office of Admissions in hope of providing some relation to athletic success and the effects on undergraduate application rates.

**Introduction:**

In today’s ever growing number of colleges and universities in which students have the option of choosing to attend, many different factors play a part in being a determining factor for why a student may want to attend a particular college or university. Determining factors include available majors and programs, school location, available financial aid, housing, campus demographic, size, cost, transportation, extracurricular activities, student to faculty ratio, private versus public, as well as many other factors. While one factor may be of crucial importance to one college-bound student, another student may find that factor completely irrelevant. Certainly one could argue that the different athletic programs that are available for students at both the club and varsity level also have a certain amount of appeal and drawing factor for many college students. At many colleges and universities that have experienced recent athletic success, it is important to look into how this success on the playing field leads to increased exposure and increased student interest for undergraduate admission. Throughout this report we will look at how other colleges and universities have benefited from athletic success and what effect this had on undergraduate applications for admission, and we will also compare this to the admissions
data of Appalachian State University and what effect this had on Appalachian’s undergraduate applications for admission.

My objective is to prove that increased collegiate athletic success positively influences the application rate for undergraduate admissions at colleges and universities. While it is difficult to state that athletic success exclusively determines whether or not a student wishes to apply for admission, it is reasonable to point out that increased exposure and awareness of a given university benefiting from athletic success often affects the amount of applications received for undergraduate admission.

**Statement of the Problem:**

One question that is often posed within the Office of Admissions at Appalachian is “does any of this recent athletic success have any bearing on the amount of perspective students who request information or apply for admission, and if so, how do we find out the exact numbers of applicants who applied due to reasons concerning athletic success?” Obviously this is a tough issue to dissect and certainly we can attribute many different reasons for why students choose to apply to certain schools. It is important to attempt this study because many schools around the nation will inevitably experience a rise in athletic success at some point or another, and University offices should be prepared to come to terms with how this increased exposure and success in athletics will lead to more of a demand on student admission to those respective schools. In other words, you want to be as knowledgeable as possible on how athletics can affect your institution once your school makes the national spotlight from time to time.
Review of Related Literature:

Many researchers believe that successful athletic programs can act as advertising for their respective institutions. Robert Frank, who teaches at Cornell University, suggests that athletic success may serve two functions toward perspective students; “one is that many prospective students are sports fans, some of whom may decide where to apply in part on the basis of their assessments of which institutions are most likely to play host to exciting athletic contests. A second influence is the broader effect of university name recognition. The names of institutions with successful big-time athletic programs appear frequently in the media, making them generally more familiar to prospective students. On this view, a big-time athletic program serves much like a national advertising campaign” (Frank, 2004). Indeed it is hard to argue against the potential for extra publicity and media attention given to successful athletic programs, especially in large sporting events such as NCAA football and basketball championship games. The schools featured in these yearly contests receive an enormous amount of television and radio airtime as well as countless newspaper, magazine, and Internet articles as well as many other types of media attention. Many schools see this as a huge advertising advantage when their respective teams have successful sporting seasons and compete for championships.

One of the first real studies to compare intercollegiate athletic success and undergraduate application rates for admission was Toma and Cross (1998). They examined schools between 1979 and 1992 in order to find if national titles in basketball or football had any subsequent effect on undergraduate admissions applications. Using comparable peer institutions to those schools who had won national championships, Toma and Cross created a control group for purposes of comparison. The authors found that of the 16 schools that won or shared championships in college football, 14 showed some increase in the number of applications
received for the first freshman class following the championship. Seven schools had an increase of 10% or more, and two schools had an increase of 20% or more. In basketball, “ten of 13 schools experienced some increase in applications in the admission year following the NCAA Tournament championship” (Toma & Cross, 1998). The increase in basketball percentage is usually lower than that of football since the peak application period for undergraduate admissions takes place during college football season. Basketball championships take place in the spring as opposed to the fall. Toma and Cross recognize that many factors likely influence student college choice but their “preliminary findings suggest that success in intercollegiate athletics – in the form of a national championship in one of the two marquee sports of football and men’s basketball – appears to translate into a sometimes dramatic increase in the number of admissions applications received in both absolute terms and relative to peer institutions” (Toma & Cross, 1998).

At George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, the admissions office has also witnessed an increase in applications for undergraduate admission following an improbable run in the 2006 NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament. Hardly expected to make it out of the first round of 64 teams, the Patriots clawed their way into the final four after taking down basketball giants that included Michigan State, North Carolina, and Connecticut. In doing so, George Mason became the first mid-major conference team to reach the final four since 1979. Andrew Flagel, who is Dean of Admissions at George Mason, said in December of 2006 that “applications were up 20% from this time last year and that the number of prospective students touring campus had nearly tripled” (Himmelsbach, 2006). “Applications to the school quadrupled” following the 2005-2006 season and more students began to inquire about George Mason (Thomaselli, 2007).
Other effects also take place when schools begin to win championships. The University of Florida won the 2007 Football Bowl Series National Championship after winning the 2006 NCAA Men’s Basketball National Championship, and the admissions office began to experience the impact of the championships. “When a university is still trying to build its academic reputation, this kind of windfall is a blessing. Suddenly it allows you to be more selective because you have a bigger pool” stated University of Florida Provost, Janie Fouke (Colavecchio-Van Sickler & Lesley, 2007). School administrators also expect the championship attention to prompt more of the students accepted into Florida to actually enroll. Normally the school expects a certain percentage of accepted students to attend in the fall semester, and that rate was usually around 50 percent. However, with all of the recent championships, including another national championship for basketball in 2007, the commit rate of accepted students shot up to 63 percent. This can certainly present quite a few problems if campus administrators and officials are not prepared to react to these types of events. It is important for every college and university to have some sort of admissions plan in case these types of events take place on a college campus.

“Dr. Irvin B. Tucker, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of North Carolina has claimed that good things follow when schools obtain successful football programs – namely larger alumni donations, a higher caliber of applicants and increased graduation rates. Most experts feel that maintaining the popularity that comes with a successful sports team involves a tremendous amount of research, resources, integrity and luck” (Dean, 2007). Tucker’s reference points out that schools receive a higher caliber of applicants to choose from due to an increase in the number of applications received. Tucker also points out that “sports can attract an applicant’s attention…but then the institution has to stand up to the scrutiny that
applicants and their parents are going to apply, based on factors not at all related to football, like campus culture, percent of classes taught by full-time faculty, and how many graduates are employed at graduation or go on to graduate school” (Dean, 2007). Championships may attract more applicants, but each school has the responsibility of meeting the academic demands for their applicant pool.

Mixon and Hsing (1994) suggest that out-of-state enrollments can also be affected by successful athletic programs. Mixon and Hsing (1994) and Mixon and Ressler (1995) investigated factors affecting the recruitment of out-of-state students to colleges and universities and studies found that athletic prominence and success were related to increased out-of-state enrollment. Typically, with the increased enrollment of out-of-state students comes an increased amount of applications for undergraduate admissions. This research suggests that increased success with athletic teams can contribute to increased admissions applications and out-of-state enrollments.

McEvoy (2006) noted that institutions received a 6.59 percent increase in undergraduate applicants for admission in the year following having a football player finish among the top five players considered for the Heisman Trophy, an award given to the best college football player in the nation. McEvoy’s study was the first to note a specific player’s impact on undergraduate admissions applications to their respective institutions. Although this study was aimed more so at one player rather than an entire team, this study provides evidence of how increased intercollegiate athletic success leads to an increase in undergraduate applications for admission.
**Statement of Hypothesis:**

Increased intercollegiate athletic success positively influences the application rate for undergraduate admission at colleges and universities.

**Significance of the Study:**

I believe this study is important because we can examine trends of colleges and universities that experienced increased intercollegiate athletic success and the effect it had on the admissions offices at these different schools. We can look at how athletics can affect the visibility of a school and attract a perspective student’s attention during the application process. I hope that as a result of this study, other admissions offices at different schools will be able to evaluate what has happened at campuses that experienced an increase in intercollegiate athletic success, and what result or impact this may have had on application rates for undergraduate admissions.

**Method**

**Participants:**

The participants for this study consisted of 75 randomly selected freshmen at Appalachian State University. The freshmen were randomly selected from Freshman Seminar courses at Appalachian State University. These students are 18 to 19 years in age.

**Instruments:**

For my study I will distribute surveys to 75 randomly selected freshmen. No preference is given in regard to males or females and every survey will contain the same questions. The
questions on the survey are geared to finding if students applied, or were more likely to have
applied, due to recent increased levels of intercollegiate athletic success.

**Design:**

The design of this study will follow a descriptive research design. I will report the results
of the surveys as well as data received from Appalachian State’s Office of Admissions. This
data will be useful when looking at the trend of application rates taken from the past ten years
and if there is any noticeable difference that has taken place recently concerning the application
rates.

**Procedure:**

A total of 75 freshmen students were chosen as random participants for this study. I
visited four Freshman Seminar classes at Appalachian State University and students participated
in this study by taking a short survey. A survey featuring three questions was passed out to each
participant. The results of the survey were entered into SPSS, a data analysis program used for
research, and I was able to assess the responses in relation to admissions office data.

**Results:**

The results of each question from the survey as well as the percentages from the entire
group of participants are displayed on frequency tables and charts in the appendix. Before
addressing those results, I think it is important to highlight the application totals from the past ten
years:

1997: 7,867 total applications received
1998: 8,106
1999: 8,216
2000: 8,871
2001: 9,047
2002: 9,442
2003: 10,095
2004: 10,366
2005: 10,609
2006: 11,039* (year following first NCAA FCS National Championship)
2007: 12,931* (year following second NCAA FCS National Championship)

*ASU applications statistics courtesy of the ASU Office of Admissions

The trend for applications increasing seemed to be very similar for years 1997 through 2006. When looking at 2006 compared with 2007, we can certainly see a big rise in application totals. In one year alone, the office of admissions boosted application totals by almost 1,900 applications. As of 1:30pm on November 9, 2007, the admissions office at Appalachian State University had received 8,218 total applications for undergraduate admission. When comparing this number to last year’s data we can look at November 14, 2006 when the office had only received 6,605 applications. This is a 24.42% increase in applications for 2008 compared to 2007 at the current comparison. Another interesting side-note to this year’s total thus far is that it already surpasses all of the applications received for the entire year of 1999.

When comparing this increase of 24.42% to the responses of the survey questions, it is very interesting to notice the similarities. Question one received a 25.3% response rate that supports my hypothesis while question’s two and three received 22.7% and 24.0% response rates respectively, that also supported my hypothesis. All three response percentages are very close to the application increase percentage and this only provides more support for my hypothesis.
Discussion:

The purpose of this study was to suggest that increases in athletic success for intercollegiate athletics can positively influence the application rate for undergraduate admission. A 24.42% increase in applications is extremely unusual for most colleges and universities and this only further suggests that this increase had to result from some factor or combination of factors. The results from this study show that a certain percentage of students felt they were more likely to apply after noticing the success of Appalachian’s athletic teams. I feel this study shows more possibilities as to what can happen with undergraduate admission applications following an increase in athletic success. Another study that could potentially introduce some interesting findings would be the amount of increased media exposure that comes with a successful athletic team and the effects that this may have on a college or university.
REFERENCES


Appendix:

FREQUENCIES
VARIABLES=question1 question2 question3
/STATISTICS=STDDEV MEAN MEDIAN MODE SKEWNESS SESKEW
/BARCHART PERCENT
/OPTIONS ANALYSIS.

Frequencies

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<th>&quot;Do you believe the success of the athletic programs at Appalachian State University influenced you to apply for undergraduate admission to ASU?&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Did the success of the football team or men's basketball team influenced your decision to apply for admission to Appalachian State University?&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Did you more actively pursue admission to Appalachian State University as a result of the recent increase in athletic success of our sports teams?&quot;</th>
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Frequency Table

"Do you believe the success of the athletic programs at Appalachian State University influenced you to apply for undergraduate admission to ASU?"

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"Did the success of the football team or men's basketball team influenced your decision to apply for admission to Appalachian State University?"

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"Did you more actively pursue admission to Appalachian State University as a result of the recent increase in athletic success of our sports teams?"

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"Do you believe the success of the athletic programs at Appalachian State University influenced you to apply for undergraduate admission to ASU?"

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