Athletics or Academics: The Effects of University Conference Switches

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The presence of athletic departments on college campuses has been a source of contention for a number of stakeholders in educational environments (McCormick & Tinsley, 1987; Roy, Graeff, & Harmon, 2008). From this, a great number of research studies has considered how the existence of college athletics may affect factors such as finances (Daughtrey & Stotlar, 2000; McEvoy, Morse, & Shapiro, 2013), test scores (McCormick, 1987; Mixon, 1995), admissions (Noll, 2004; Zimbalist, 1999), and donation patterns to schools (Humphreys & Mondello, 2007; Stinson & Howad, 2008). While a number of these studies show the potential benefits between athletics and academics, including enhanced institutional test scores because of athletics (Mixon, 1995) and boosts in applications for certain schools (Goff, 2000), there also is an array of issues related to classroom performance (Maloney & McCormick, 1993), graduation rates (Eckard, 2010), exploitation of student-athletes (Brown & Jewell, 2013), and even donors focusing on athletic giving instead of academic (Howard, 1999). From this literature, it is evident that research has shown a mixture of both positive and negative effects which may fall upon a university if it has an athletic department.

The examination of the athletics-academics relationship has become even more strained in recent years, especially with the growth of a variety of issues including: pay of play, the potential for student-athletes to unionize, and the realignment of athletic departments (and the institutions they represent) into new conferences. Specifically focusing on conference switching and realignment, a number of studies have considered the effects that having schools move from one conference to another have had in regards to competitive balance (Dittmore & Crow, 2010; Perline & Stoldt, 2007), attendance (Groza, 2010) as well as athletic-department revenues (Dennie, 2011). Considering this, the present study examines the effect that switching athletic conferences has on the admissions rate of Division I-A universities between 2010 and 2015. In the modern collegiate sport environment, revenue and profitability are considered to be one of the main driving factors in making the decision to switch conferences (Dennie, 2011). While this may be accomplished for the athletic department, does such a switch have other positive implications for an academic institution? Considering that 40 of 129 eligible Division I-A schools (around 31%) have switched to a different athletic conference for football in the past six years, it is certainly the case that there is need to analyze the impact that these movements have on academic institutions. Thus, the present study provides contribution to the literature through analyzing this issue.

In order to model and estimate results on the effects of conference switching, data has been collected to measure the net and percentage changes in admissions rates at schools that have switched to new conferences within the last five years. Through the use of a regression model to control for a variety of factors including tuition, student aid, and other variables, the estimated results find that there are potential short-term gains in admissions for schools that switch conferences. Six models were run considering different measures of admissions and length of time. Results from the models indicated that switching a conference has a positive effect on net admissions to a university in a two-year time frame. The average gain in admissions during the two-year window was around 1,835 students, an effect that disappeared in the third and fourth year. Implications from the initial estimates from the model indicate that switching conferences may have short-term gains for an entire academic institution in the number of students, but raises the question of the long-term benefits this behavior may have for universities.