If We Build It, Will They Come? The Effect of New Athletic Facilities on Recruiting Rankings for Power Five Football and Men’s Basketball Programs

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We are in midst of a nation-wide building boom at colleges and universities. Higher education across the United States has spent over $11 billion on new facilities in each year from 2010 to 2012, more than double the funding spent in 2000 (Marcus, 2015). In recent years, this spending has only increased. In 2015, higher education spent over $11.5 billion on facilities upgrades and 21 million square feet of new facilities, a new all-time high (Dodge Research and Analytics, 2017). The timing of this rapid build-up of facilities also coincides with significant increases in tuition costs for students pursuing a college degree. Universities are building new facilities with the hope state legislators will provide the necessary funding to cover the costs (Marcus, 2016). State legislators are often balking at these requests, leading to universities raising tuition costs and fees to pay for the new facilities rather than canceling the project (Marcus, 2015, 2016).

While controversial, an important public perception entity is the university’s athletic department (Goff, 2004; Fort, 2013). During this explosion of new educational facilities, the biggest and most expensive facilities being constructed are in the name of intercollegiate athletics (Hobson & Rich, 2015a, 2015b). There is, in essence, an “arms race” taking place across college athletics in which universities are competing with each other to reach an always-increasing standard of lavish athletic facilities. While these facilities are costing in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, little research is examining the potential return on investment for colleges and athletic programs. More specifically, questions remain as to whether or not new athletic facilities are spurring athletic recruiting success to show a return on the investment.

As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of new athletic facilities on recruiting rankings for Power Five (Atlantic Coast Conference, Southeastern Conference, Big 12, Big Ten, and Pacific-12) football and men’s basketball programs. Looking at facility construction and renovation projects that were completed between 2002 and 2014, samples consisting of 33 direct projects and 24 indirect projects in men’s basketball, and 72 direct projects and 35 indirect projects in football were compiled. The “direct” projects encompassed those that were closely related to student-athletes’ athletic performances (e.g., weight rooms and practice facilities, playing field and stadium improvements), while the “indirect” projects consisted of those not directly related to athletic performance (e.g., locker rooms, academic centers, and dormitories). The measurable outcome data in this analysis consisted of the composite team recruiting rankings published annually by www.247sports.com.

A one-way, repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then used to assess how the recruiting rankings in each sample varied across the four time periods surrounding the completion of the project; that is, two years before (t – 2), one year before (t – 1), one year after (t + 1), and two years after (t + 2). This method was appropriate given that programs’ recruiting rankings were being measured for consecutive time periods in order to assess their response to the facility intervention. ANOVA and its associated F-test and pairwise contrasts provided simple and intuitive ways of assessing whether or not there were statistical differences in the programs’ mean recruiting rankings across each point in time. In each sample, the basic assumptions of ANOVA were met.

Looking at the samples of both direct, F(3, 213) = 1.108, p = .347, and indirect, F(3, 102) = 1.015, p = .389, facilities improvements in football, no significant differences were seen across the time periods. Furthermore, the pairwise comparisons between the time periods in the two football samples did not reveal any conclusive or significant differences in schools’ average recruiting rankings. Shifting the analysis to men’s basketball, some of the strongest evidence of facilities having a legitimate impact on recruiting was seen in the direct improvements sample. Here, the
ANOVA F-test was significant, \( F(3, 96) = 4.273, p = .007 \), suggesting there were significant differences in recruiting rankings across the observed time periods. The pairwise comparisons then allowed for a specific look at the deviations between each time period, and it was seen that the mean recruiting rankings in \( t - 2 \) differed significantly from those in the two years after a facility was completed. Indeed, the mean of 41.51 in \( t + 1 \) was significantly lower (\( p = .024 \)) than the mean of 81.26 in \( t - 2 \). Similarly, the mean recruiting ranking of 41.21 in \( t + 2 \) showed that recruiting remained significantly improved (\( p = .017 \)) up to two years after completion of the project. As for the men’s basketball sample containing the indirect facility improvements, no significant differences were observed, \( F(3, 69) = .912, p = .440 \).

These findings raise a number of interesting talking points for athletic and college administrators. For instance, investments in athletic facilities do not appear to offer any near-term benefits to football recruiting, but they do for men’s basketball. Seeing as the number of football-related upgrades dwarfed the amount in men’s basketball, it may be that the football recruiting scene in the Power Five has become overcrowded with improved facilities offerings. Perhaps the only way to garner increased football recruiting success is to pursue uncommon facility upgrades that offer something unique to the student-athlete experience. Furthermore, the sharp drop-off in basketball recruiting rankings from \( t - 2 \) to \( t - 1 \) also suggests the announcement or expectation surrounding an impending completion may lead to benefits in recruiting; that is, the announcement or near finish of one may be just as impactful as the actual completion date. With many universities breaking down their facility projects into multiple phases, athletic departments may already be capturing this benefit by trying to lengthen the period where they can discuss the facilities upgrades to prospective recruits. Ultimately, the results of this study form a platform from which universities can examine their spending and future studies on this topic can proceed.