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The cost of athletics in higher ed

Among the greatest concerns regarding higher education are their budgets. With diminishing appropriations from state governments for public institutions, and decreasing enrollments affecting not only state but also private institutions, we see policies of slash and burn. Entire academic programs have been eliminated, which has oftentimes led to a loss of jobs. Yet a number of other programs that have nothing to do with the main mission of colleges and universities – education – seem to be untouchable. The most prominent example is athletics.

It is interesting that big sports programs are a feature unique to the American higher education system. In other parts of the world, particularly in Europe and Asia, athletic programs are confined to little more than intramural activities, which represent a minuscule part of their budgets. The question is, could we really save significant amounts of money but eliminating big-time sports on campuses?

Erica Blom, a research associate at the Education Policy Program at the Urban Institute, a Washington D.C.-based think tank, came up with some answers to that question. She began by asking, “If colleges got rid of athletics, how many more students could they fund?” Her answer? At least 200,000 basic scholarships could be awarded.

In her study published on the Web site of the Urban Institute, she reports that although some sports programs do bring in some revenue, that is not the norm but the exception. Other researchers have made this point in the past. The reason is very simple. Running big-time

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athletic programs require expenditures in hiring coaches (some of them with much higher salaries than the university presidents), athletic scholarships (the student-athletes cannot be paid as professionals are), facilities (some of them monstrous, like some football stadiums on campuses), travel, food for athletes, sports equipment, uniforms and overhead. These costs are oftentimes concealed so that programs do not appear as expensive as they really are.

After taking into consideration all the costs, then adding the revenues from ticket sales, alumni donations, conference distributions, and licensing, Blom, using the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) public Division I schools finance data, calculated that the median school loss was \$11 million. In other words, if these athletic programs were to be removed, it would save \$2.5 billion for these public institutions of higher education as a whole. “If this money were instead distributed as \$4,000 scholarships to students (based roughly on the average 2016 Pell grant of \$3,740),” she reported, “an additional 615,438 scholarships could be distributed.”

These figures beg the question of why U.S. colleges and universities are subsidizing a bad business practice?

Here is when we enter a less logical course of thinking, one based on myths and emotions rather than facts. Many colleges and universities claim that eliminating athletic programs will translate into a drop in financial support from alumni and other donors. Yet that assumption is not supported by other studies, such as a 2009 Congressional Budget Office report that concluded that there is no evidence that in aggregate, athletic programs increase donations or student quality. But even if that were the case, wouldn’t it be the responsibility of the administration of colleges and university to educate their alumni regarding where their donations can be more effectively used for the mission of the college?

Add to that all the scandals that surface in the media about college sports, particularly those that have to do with sexual assault, the “Mickey Mouse” classes offered to athlete students so they can stay in the programs, physical injuries (particularly concussions in the case of football players) and the “cost” of college athletics goes far beyond monetary considerations.

This does not mean that athletics should be banned from campuses. On the contrary, intramural competitions should be encouraged since they can help teach leadership, teamwork, and discipline.

Leaders of higher education institutions need to understand that we live in an ever-changing world, one where new realities require a profound change regarding the culture on campus. Since we are facing more limitations when it comes to sources of funding for educa-

tional purposes, we in academia must become more fiscally responsible by eliminating programs that are not financially sustainable, as is the case for most sports programs. We should redirect our efforts to finance our educational mission rather than activities that have little to do with that mission.

We have to educate our donors about the value of investing in students, providing them with an education that will provide them with better standards of living. This end is achieved through quality education whether in the classroom, the lab, the field, or through special but very impactful study abroad experiences.

Finally, we have the moral obligation to teach by example what our mission is and stay focused on it. And that is achievable only by having a high-quality faculty who inspire and challenge students and is that done mostly in smaller classes and in more one-on-one interactions.

Most likely, our students will end up in positions in which they will be supervising others, where they will be solving problems for their employers and themselves, and where they will be called upon to serve as examples to people close to them. If we cannot exemplify good management of resources and the triviality of certain activities, we will be failing in our mission while placing our institutions in jeopardy.

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