Football makes higher education more popular

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Stanford and the University of California-Berkeley are rivals both athletically and academically.

(Phys.org)—When Stanford's football season started up last Friday, "Why football?" probably wasn't the question on the minds of most fans. But for Mitchell Stevens, an associate professor at Stanford's School of

Education, college football's unassailable popularity is exactly what makes the topic worth pursuing.

"No other country links sports with colleges and universities the way we do in the U.S.," Stevens said. "Academics like to pretend that football is ancillary to the main business of higher education. But if you look at admissions or donations, you see it's central."

So, why is football so entrenched in American higher education? According to Stevens, Stanford engineering consulting professor Arik Lifschitz and University of Iowa sociologist Michael Sauder, the answer is status, both on the field and in the classroom.

Rise of the college man

The late 19th century created something of a perfect cultural storm for the rise of football, the researchers found. Faced with the closing of the American frontier and the rise of office jobs as the new norm, the country was in the midst of a crisis of masculinity.

Universities were particularly concerned about the public perception of masculinity. The college curriculum of the time was focused on the classics – in the eyes of the public, as Stevens put it, "not a very useful degree, and not a very macho one, either."

Football, an emerging sport in the 19th century, was violent, manly and hugely popular. The game became a central component of American colleges' retooled image – not just as halls of learning, but as places where the "well-rounded college man" could socialize and enjoy himself.

"Football makes higher education appealing in a society that's skeptical of intellectuals generally," said Stevens.

The demand for opponents in football games also forced colleges to do something they'd done little of before - interact.

In the mid-1800s, colleges rarely sought out institutions that weren't nearby. There was no national association of colleges, or even a sense that universities from different parts of the country were comparable. It made for a highly decentralized collegiate system and what these sociologists call "status anarchy" – a culture in which there is no agreed-upon way to measure reputation.

College football imposed order on this chaos. Intercollegiate sports, particularly football, were the impetus behind the first attempts to link colleges on regional and national levels. One of these was the 1905 founding of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association, later to become the NCAA. The other was the rise of college athletic conferences.

In the club

"League affiliations function in much the same way that tables work in a junior high cafeteria," said Stevens. Whom you spend time with defines your public identity.

To examine how far this effect went, the researchers compared the conference affiliations, academic reputations and athletic performances of 283 universities from 1896-2010. What they found was counterintuitive: athletic conferences have as much to do with academic reputation as they do with sports.

Schools tend to belong to conferences composed of schools with similar academic characteristics, in addition to colleges from the same region or with similarly ranked football teams. And high-status conferences, whether for academic or athletic reasons, have more stable memberships – in other words, they are more cliquish.

The researchers point out that schools are often aware of these unspoken rules. When asked about Boise State University's failure to be included in the Pac-12 despite its highly ranked football program, President Bob Kustra pointed to the school's less-prominent reputation for research.

A school's conference affiliation can even change its academic standing. The researchers found that schools with the lowest academic reputations in their conferences saw their academic status improve over time to more closely resemble other member schools' reputations.

The researchers refer to athletic and academic status as "independent but not autonomous." Schools can occupy different rungs on different social ladders. But the two kinds of status can influence one another as well.

Football is "an integral part of the way schools try to improve their reputations," Stevens said. And it's not just money and trophies at sake – it's brains.

Provided by Stanford University

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