

# Die-hard college sports fans defy expectations

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When March Madness kicks off this week, you might expect the bleachers to be filled with alumni and students from the competing colleges. In fact, only about a third of die-hard college sports fans are alumni of their teams' universities, and another third never attended college at all, according to a new Duke University study.

The new research by Charles Clotfelter, a professor of [public policy](#), economics and law at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy, draws upon an unusual source for its conclusions: obituaries.

Clotfelter's article, "Die-Hard Fans and Ivory Tower's Ties That Bind," was published online by *The Social Science Quarterly* on Jan. 19.

"Accounts such as these, written to celebrate the life of a loved one, suggest that the decedent's interest in this college team was no casual thing, but rather a noteworthy source of identity," Clotfelter writes. "To refer to these individuals merely as [fans](#) of [college football](#) or basketball is surely inadequate. These were true believers."

To find these die-hard fans, Clotfelter picked 26 colleges with unusual team names, such as the Crimson Tide or the Jayhawks, and searched online obituaries for team references. His research group collected 1,300 obituaries, 50 for each team. They found testimonies to the fans' affection for their teams, including:

- "Throughout his adult life, [he] was a dedicated Ohio State

football fan. He owned a scarlet and grey 'Buckeye Van' which he drove to the home games. The license plate on [his] van read 'SACK MI'."

- "She will be watching March Madness from the heavens, where she will be cheering on the Blue Devils of Duke and her beloved Coach K."
- [He] was an independent thinker in all aspects of his life. This was no more evident than in his remaining the only Wolverine fan in a large family of Buckeyes."
- "She enjoyed family traditions, knitting and Penn State football."

Clotfelter compared the fans' obituaries to a random sample of obituaries from the same states. Both sets contained information such as gender, age, occupation, military service, college attendance, religious affiliation, civic and volunteer activity and state of residence.

Die-hard fans were rare, representing only about 2 percent of published obituaries of adults. They included three times as many men as women. Compared to others featured in obituaries, they were more likely to be white, to be mainline Protestants and to participate in coaching.

In terms of their education and professions, the die-hard fans were a diverse group. Even though a sizeable minority of the ardent fans never attended college, as a group die-hard fans were twice as likely to have attended college as the general population. Many die-hard fans held blue-collar jobs, but 22 percent were in professional occupations such as law, medicine or engineering.

Most die-hard fans lived in the same state as the college they supported, but not all. Fans of UCLA, Connecticut and Texas A&M were tightly clustered near those campuses. Notre Dame and Nebraska fans tended to be widely distributed across the country, perhaps because of the winning histories of their football programs.

Clotfelter found no significant link between the academic reputation of a college and the size of its fan base.

Die-hard fans represent an authentic link between universities and everyday people, Clotfelter said. Fandom is "a sign of the people's affection, and a source of pride, even a kind of patriotism," he said.

Clotfelter also explored the fans' political party registration by looking at state voting records. The ardent fans were 5.5 percentage points likely to register as Republicans than similar adults, but there was no difference in the rate of registration as a Democrat between fans and the control group. All fans were more likely to be affiliated with some party than to have no affiliation.

Few scholars have studied big-time college sports' ultra-loyal fans, Clotfelter said. Fans are significant to universities as customers, followers and stakeholders. Fandom can offer social capital benefits similar to civic volunteerism and other engagement, he said. Being a fan can provide a sense of ownership of the university that can extend to financial and political support.

"It's my belief that commercial sports are a core function of universities such as these, even if it is not in their mission statements," Clotfelter said. "Being a fan represents an authentic cultural tie. To call big-time college sports commercial is accurate but incomplete. It's the truth, but not the whole truth."

**More information:** "Die-Hard Fans and the Ivory Tower's Ties That Bind," Charles T. Clotfelter. *Social Science Quarterly*, Jan. 19, 2015.  
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Provided by Duke University

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