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Athletics, academics and the Flutie effect

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Quad 136

Athletics, Academics and the Flutie Effect

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Image via complex.com

For college football fans of a certain age it remains unforgettable: the **Hail Flutie Game**.

On a November night in Miami in 1984 against the defending national champion Miami Hurricanes, Doug Flutie, who was soon to win the Heisman Trophy, threw the **quintessential Hail Mary pass** into the end zone on the last play of the game where his college roommate Gerard Phelan came up with the ball for a touchdown that won the game, 47-45, for Boston College.

This storybook ending of a nationally televised game between two ranked teams allegedly led to a huge increase in publicity about and applications to Boston College, something that has subsequently been called the **Flutie Effect**.

The link between Division I athletic success and a school's reputation, prominence and enrollment has become part of the conventional wisdom in higher education. It has encouraged many Division I institutions to invest millions of dollars in their athletic programs in the hopes of experiencing the Flutie Effect.

The most recent university hoping to use athletic success to bolster its reputation is the University of Oregon, which plays for the Division I national football championship tonight against Ohio State. "**Oregon Capitalizes on Championship Run with Brand Campaign**" describes the brand campaign Oregon has built around its football success.

The basic idea is to link football excellence with everything else at the University, particularly academics. Tim Clevenger, the university's associate vice president for communications, marketing, and brand management said, "

[This is] an opportunity to say, 'The excellence that the football team and the whole athletic program in general represent is what the University of Oregon is all about.'"

Ed O'Hara, a marketing expert based in New York said of the Oregon branding exercise, "That's the Flutie Effect right there. It (winning) gives validity to everything they're doing on the branding side. They're proving it on the field, so it's a beautiful harmony of these bold new brand presentation ideas and success. That's a great, great combination."

There seem to be two goals in linking national athletic success to the broader university. One is quite concrete: to increase applications, as allegedly occurred at BC. The second is more elusive: to raise the academic profile and possibly reputation of the institution.

On the first point, while it just seems so intuitively plausible, the reality of the Flutie Effect is much more complicated, as an analysis from Boston College itself suggests:

Writing in the [Spring 2003 edition](#) of the *Boston College Magazine*, Bill McDonald, director of communications at Boston College's Lynch School of Education determined that, "Applications to BC did surge 16 percent in 1984 (from 12,414 to 14,398), and then another 12 percent (to 16,163) in 1985. But these jumps were not anomalous for BC, which in the previous decade had embarked on a program to build national enrollment using market research, a network of alumni volunteers, strategically allocated financial aid, and improvements to residence halls and academic facilities." He also observed that "in 1997, one year after revelations about gambling resulted in a coach's resignation, 13 student-athlete suspensions, an investigation by the NCAA, and hundreds of embarrassing media reports, applications for admission came in at 16,455, virtually unchanged from the previous year. Two years later, when applications jumped by a record 17 percent to 19,746, the surge followed a 4-7 year for football." Going further back in history, he reported that applications had increased 9 percent in 1978, a year when BC football had its worst year ever, with a 0-11 record.



Vintage Oregon U football logo via University of Oregon Ducks on Pinterst

The second objective is even harder to empirically verify. Certainly the publicity associated with big-time college athletic success is impossible to deny, but most schools want more than public awareness, and the link to academic reputation is a much harder case to make. If student applications do rise, that allows for the possibility of admitting a more academically talented class. How does athletic success affect faculty recruitment and performance? A university's higher profile could conceivably generate more faculty applications. The effect on current faculty is unclear. On the other hand, academic reputation could be hurt if athletic success is viewed as potentially compromising academic success, given the well-known challenges of balancing academics and athletics for student athletes. Certainly the highly regarded [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) has not enhanced its academic reputation recently as a result of its athletic programs.

In short, the link between athletic success at the Division I level and academic outcomes is empirically tenuous at best and at worst may be an expensive Faustian bargain for the DI schools that pursue it, despite the Ducks' fondest hopes. (The story at the DIII level, without the scholarships and big bucks, is a rather different one, but that is a topic for another day.)

As for tonight, as a lifelong Big Ten fan, I probably have to cheer for Ohio State anyway. Go Buckeyes.

[Michael Hemesath](#) | January 12th, 2015 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).