

## Athletics, Academics, and Rankings: The Power of Competition

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Please bear with me a moment as I write about sports. As you surely know, athletic events are a prominent part of U.S. college and university life. More than 1000 institutions are engaged in one or more of the 23 sports overseen by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) ranging from water polo to tennis to cross country and football (see <http://www.ncaa.org>). Collegiate history reveals a longstanding interdependence between athletics and institutions (Toma 2003). For example, American football is traced to 1869 with a game between Rutgers and the College of New Jersey. College basketball dates from 1895, and in the mid-1850s Harvard and Yale held the first U.S. intercollegiate competition in rowing. Athletics quickly became a vehicle for institution-building, far beyond its recreational origins as part of the “collegiate ideal.”

As I write this brief editorial, “March Madness,” the frenzy that is the quest for the U.S. national championship in men’s and women’s college basketball, is underway. From late fall to early spring, basketball teams from across the nation compete with hopes to win individual games, to claim the regular season conference title, and to triumph in the conference tournament games. Then, they wait, while the NCAA selection committee considers the teams and announces with great fanfare the successful competitors for a berth in the NCAA basketball tournaments.

Sixty-four men’s and 64 women’s teams are slated for competition over 3 weeks in late March and early April. For the uninitiated, the 64 teams are divided into regional competitions across four geographical areas, which spreads the excitement across the country. In each region, teams ranked 1–16 commence play; of course, the lowest ranked team plays the highest ranked, and the game is on. Like most games and disciplines, there is insider terminology: teams want to get through the first and second rounds to make it to round three, called the “Sweet Sixteen,” or to the “Final Four,” where two games yield the two finalists for the championship game. Teams board planes and trains; spectators scramble for tickets and hotel rooms; stay-at-home fans and others fill out brackets in serious and not-so-serious competition to see who can predict the ultimate winners of each game and the overall tournament. While the onsite spectators number in the thousands, almost every game is televised, and the home viewing audience numbers in the millions.

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With so much at stake (reputation and dollars), there is all too much pressure on high-profile teams to skirt NCAA and institutional policies on issues such as student recruitment and eligibility. Failure to comply with rules creates unfair competition between institutions, and this can be devastating to careers and institutions. It is most unfortunate when the unacceptable actions of a small number cast a shadow over entire institutions and individual and team sports.

The complexity of college athletics is fascinating, however; and I continue to be impressed by the huge number of NCAA student athletes (over 400,000) who deftly balance athletics and academics while participating in competitive sports that require high levels of skills and extensive practice. These students represent their institutions and themselves with dignity and dedication, largely for the joy of the game.

Well, by now you know, I must admit to being a basketball fan—the action is live; David can beat Goliath; institutions can go head-to-head real time to compare their skills and strategy. I became hooked on basketball in middle school and played through high school. Interestingly, now many research studies tout the value of sports for girls. Trophies and triumphs lined the walls of my bedroom, including the high school “Scholastic-Athlete” award. Many years later, I have not given up the vicarious pleasure of watching an upbeat, intense style of basketball. Sports are a great form of recreation, escapism, and plain competitive fun. In watching sports, we can all be athletes in our minds and in our hearts for a brief time.

I wonder how to bring that same enthusiasm to the classroom and to the campus. How can we get 5,000 people (typical attendance at a low stakes, midseason basketball game) to watch and be excited about moot court or a science project competition? Estimates place the NCAA men’s tournament game average at over 9.0 million viewers and the championship game at over 20 million. If we set up academic games like athletic games, who would participate? What would draw student interest and viewer interest? What brings 80,000 fans to a single football game in the Southeastern Conference on a Saturday? Multiplied by 14 SEC conference institutions, that’s over 1 million non-players who are “actively participating.”

Is it the competition that brings us back game after game? If there were no “winner” at the end, would we stay for the whole game, would we drop our season tickets? What can we learn from athletics to apply to academics? Diversity is an area where team sports excel, as teams are built around individual differences that create the “ideal” whole. As we teach students how to collaborate, maybe we should introduce more competition within and across universities. Now, college and university rankings serve as a proxy for competition; and, though we grumble about the lack of transparency (or inadequacy) of the criteria, we still anxiously await the rankings. In many ways, the rankings industry has filled a void and set up a false competition over which we have little control. Fundamentally, people like to compete (as well as collaborate), to be winners, to “be in the game.” Is it time for universities to reject rankings, lay claim to the criteria, and embrace academic competition, head-to-head? We could put our outstanding students (our best academic players) in direct competition across the conferences, across institutions. We could have some fun, test our academics on the “field,” and establish bragging rights, while getting valuable feedback on our programs and student preparedness. Not rankings, but real competition. Game on!

## Reference

- Toma, J. D. (2003). *Football U.: Spectator sports in the life of the American University*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.