

Are we spending too much money on college football?

That was the question posed to me last week when a producer for NPR in Seattle asked that I debate Pulitzer Prize-winning author H.G. Bissinger, who wrote the 1990 best-seller “Friday Night Lights.”

This opportunity came about because of a column I wrote in response to Bissinger’s op-ed piece in The Wall Street Journal in which he argued that universities should do away with college sports because they are an academic distraction and exploit athletes.

That may be true, but tell that to Star Lotulelei or Ziggy Ansah. Or kickers that get four-year scholarships.

An actual live exchange with Bissinger never took place because I was on a short vacation in Orlando, Fla., but the producer, Hannah Burn, recorded my responses to questions she said would be posed to Bissinger.

In short, I agreed that the escalating amount of money spent on college sports was an unfortunate arms race that unfairly left expenditures on academics behind, and that academics — the work of professors, the instruction of students — was the ultimate most important product of universities. But because of huge TV contracts, the interest of the masses, and the increased size of stadiums to meet demand, college sports have become a national industry that could not be undone or unplugged.

It is a case of our society worshipping celebrity and the specter of sports, commonplace since the beginning of time, through the Roman gladiators and Greek games to the horsemanship of the great Comanche Indian Nation, of which I am a registered member.

It is interesting, however, that this week the NCAA, in conjunction with the Knight Commission, came out with an interactive database of college athletic expenditures. It shows just how crazy the arms race has become, especially in college football.

Data is not available for private schools like Notre Dame and [BYU](#), but at the University of Utah, Utah State and Boise State, comparing the money spent on regular students to student-athletes is dizzying.

More money is spent on football teams and athletes at universities because of rising coaching salaries, medical costs (including surgeries), uniforms, equipment, training, support staffs and facilities.

And yes, as unbalanced as it is compared with academia, it has become so because of demand by our culture. Nobody is going to pay a \$70 stadium ticket to watch a test tube experiment.

Oklahoma State has received more than \$250 million from T. Boone Pickens over a span of nine years — the majority of it going to athletic facilities that bear his name. Baylor recently announced the "largest capital gift in university history" from alum Drayton McLane, owner of the Houston Astros. It will go to a new football stadium.

When academics are placed on the balance scale with sports, is the imbalance right? No, but it's reality and university presidents know it. That's why they are making coaches the highest-paid public employees in most states, including Utah. They get it back and more.

College sports have become the front porch of our major universities. They bring publicity, recognition and fame.

Here's a short peek on rising football costs at Utah, Utah State and Boise State — schools that have recently joined bigger conferences.

From 2005 to 2011, Utah raised its spending per football player annually from \$76,847 to \$138,601 — an increase of 80 percent. The spending increase for regular students in that span was from \$11,082 to \$13,736 — 24 percent.

At Utah State during this same period, football player expenditures increased from \$42,083 to \$56,776 — 35 percent — while the expenditures per regular student decreased from \$9,901 to \$9,677 — minus-2 percent

At Boise State, football player expenditures went from \$54,972 in 2005 to \$172,415 — a 214 percent increase. BSU spent \$7,764 on regular students in 2005 and increased that 18 percent to \$9,134 in 2011.

In the argument crosshairs, this is a lot of money to spend on fun and games. But it's also an investment in activities that brings millions of dollars to universities and generates tremendous pride to the communities where they are located. Without college football, this money does not filter through hands of many (parking, concessions, lodging, travel, food, etc.). It's a big business woven into the fabric of our society.

From College Station, Texas, to Oxford, Miss., from Laramie, Wyo., to Lincoln, Neb., this is a singing genie nobody can put back in the bottle.

Other general findings by the commission?

The increase of coaching salaries has been a big factor in athletic spending growth rates. Among the five conferences with the largest athletics budgets, median coaching salaries increased as much as 54 percent in inflation-adjusted terms from 2005 to 2011, compared to 24 percent for all FBS schools.

"The median football spending per scholarship football player at all FBS institutions is expected to rise from \$138,424 in 2011 to \$212,303 in 2020, based on prior growth rates and controlling for inflation. By comparison, in the top FBS spending quartile, the 2011 median spending level of \$243,900 per scholarship football player is estimated to increase to nearly \$400,000 in 2020," according to a press release on the report.

Crazy?

Yes, I confessed to Ms. Burns.

But it is a crazy arrangement that is feeding on itself.

Nobody is going to unhook the IV.

Dick Harmon, Deseret News sports columnist, can be found on Twitter as [Harmonwrites](#) and can be contacted at dkharmon@desnews.com.

Your PBL question:

Does the cost of sports affect your academic grades?

Survey-

For this small bivariate data collection

**Find at least 20 athletes and ask them to estimate cost of sport (including gear, uniforms, registration/club fee). Be sure to include PRICE in \$*

**Ask the same 20 athletes their (science, language arts, math) grade (INCLUDE PERCENTAGE) and record results*

Scatterplot-

**Construct a scatterplot comparing the cost of sport (x) and academic grade (y).*

**Create a line of best fit*

**Write an equation of the line. Use this line to predict trends or patterns.*

Summary-

**Describe the purpose of PBL. Include information about the type of athletes you surveyed (age, female/male, type of athlete)*

**Describe the scatterplot data*

1) Describe the association between the bivariate data (Strong, weak or no association. If strong association, then describe if the trend is linear/nonlinear or positive/negative)

2) Describe any outliers and their meaning in context

**Concluding statement- Compare the results of academic performance and cost of sport using scatterplot data analysis.*

Optional-Email sports columnist your opinion about academic performance and cost of sports.

Statistics and Probability - Investigate patterns of association in bivariate data.

8.SP.A.1: Construct and interpret scatter plots for bivariate measurement data to investigate patterns of association between two quantities. Describe patterns such as clustering, outliers, positive or negative association, linear association, and nonlinear association.

8.SP.A.2 : Know that straight lines are widely used to model relationships between two quantitative variables. For scatter plots that suggest a linear association, informally fit a straight line, and informally assess the model fit by judging the closeness of the data points to the line.

8.SP.A.3: Use the equation of a linear model to solve problems in the context of bivariate measurement data, interpreting the slope and intercept. For example, in a linear model for a biology experiment, interpret a slope of 1.5 cm/hr as meaning that an additional hour of sunlight each day is associated with an additional 1.5 cm in mature plant height.