



POLL #4

INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS:  
AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION?

What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. Our fourth poll focuses on intercollegiate athletics.

Stories of the problems in intercollegiate athletics are a regular feature in the higher education trade and popular media. Recent stories raise questions about the role of academic advisers in ensuring the academic "success" of student athletes, the roles of presidents and faculty in decisions about athletics, the right of student athletes to unionize, the distribution of scholarships to athletes, and the health, safety, and compensation of student athletes. Given these and many other concerns—why do colleges and universities continue to have intercollegiate athletics programs?

The most recent AHEAD poll provides insight into what higher education leaders are thinking with regard to intercollegiate athletics. Most—though not all—higher education leaders believe that intercollegiate athletics are an important component of higher education. Leaders perceive multiple benefits of intercollegiate athletics, especially to the student/scholar athlete and at Division III institutions. But some leaders also articulate concerns. Many believe that the contribution of athletics to an institution's mission is one of the key concerns facing higher education. Institutional funding for athletics has been increasing at many institutions—and at least some leaders worry about the sustainability of continued increases.

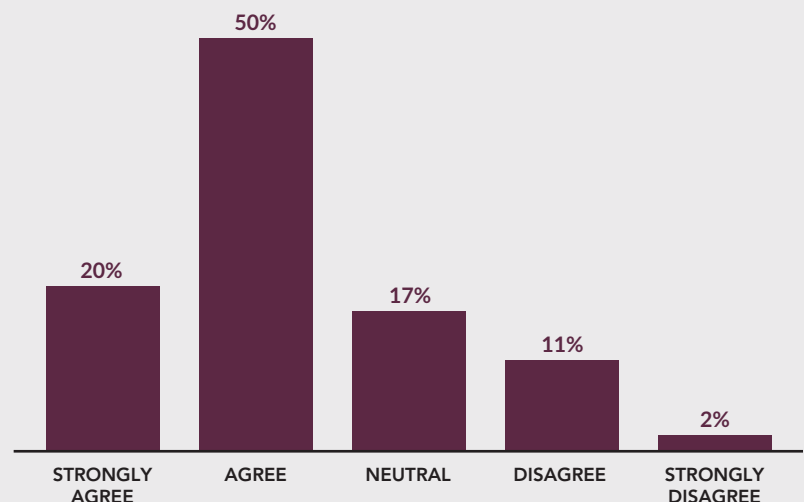
**Most higher education leaders agree that athletics are important.**

The majority (70%) of responding higher education leaders agree or strongly agree that athletics are an important component of higher education. As might be expected, respondents who have at least some direct connection to athletics in their current positions are more likely to affirm the importance of athletics (85%). But even two-thirds (63%) of those with no direct connection to athletics agree that athletics are important.

One leader articulated the importance of athletics to higher education and society, stating:

*There is a proliferation of negative news stories surrounding intercollegiate sports. This is an unfair portrayal of the benefits intercollegiate sports and student-athletes have on the institution, the community and society.*

FIG. 1 Agreement that athletics are an important component of higher education



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**Higher education leaders believe that intercollegiate athletics can benefit student/scholar athletes and institutions.**

When asked to rank five potential reasons that colleges have athletic programs, respondents were divided. Comparable shares ranked first “enhancement to institutional reputation” (26%) and “benefits to student/scholar athletes” (25%). Considerable shares of respondents also ranked first “benefits to student recruitment” (18%) and “revenue generated” (17%).

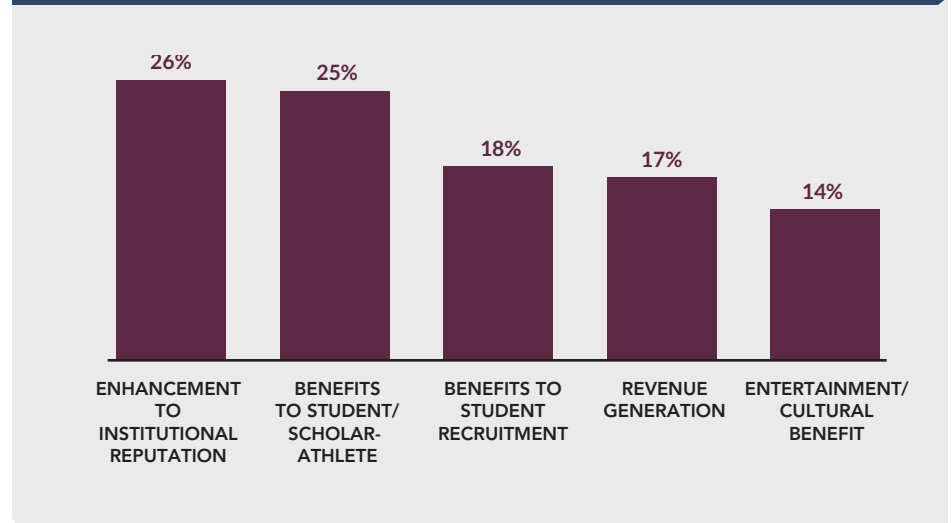
Several leaders stressed that intercollegiate athletics vary across Divisions I, II, and III as well as between conferences in the same division (e.g., Ivy League versus Big 10). One respondent described these differences:

*DII has a much greater emphasis on athletics as a part of the student experience. The academic focus as well as values and how the athletic program is integrated into student experience and culture of the college is different at DII, DIII... I view the large DI programs as auxiliary businesses and not an integrated part of the academic culture.*

Another leader articulated both the benefits and institutional challenges that can come with intercollegiate athletics:

*I work at an institution where there is currently a strategy to improve enrollment through a modest athletic presence. While the efforts of the institution are not necessarily reflective of the larger conversation of higher education and athletics, what is interesting is that the introduction of athletics has: improved enrollment, improved student life, and has amplified the importance of academic support services for all students. Athletics has also expanded our ability to form meaningful partnerships within the community. While these are all quite positive, the phenomenon we are finding is that the administrative burden is substantial, and the college continues to adjust to the needs of its athletics programs.*

FIG. 2 Top-ranked reason colleges have athletic programs

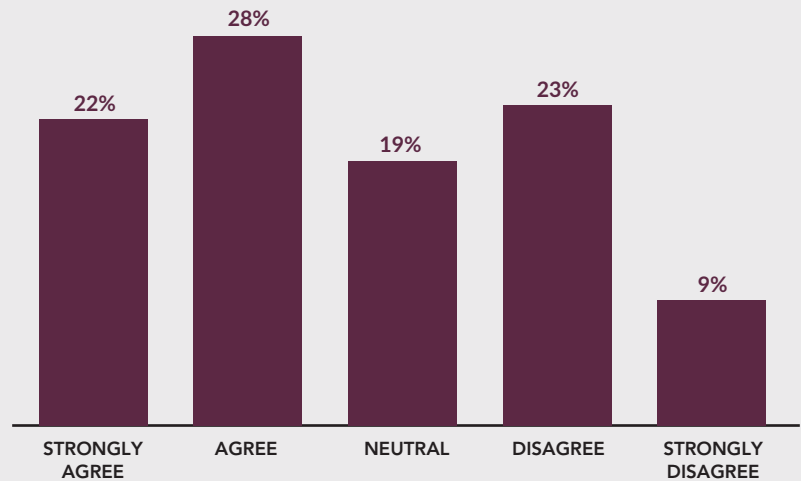


## INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS: AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

**Intercollegiate athletics is a common topic of discussion among many higher education leaders.**

Half of respondents agree or strongly agree that there is a great deal of discussion about the importance of college athletics among higher education leaders in their circle. The share of leaders who agree that college athletics is a common topic of discussion is higher among those with at least some direct connection to athletics than among other higher education leaders (64% versus 41%).

FIG. 3 Agreement that “in my circle of higher education leaders,” there is a great deal of discussion about the importance of athletics

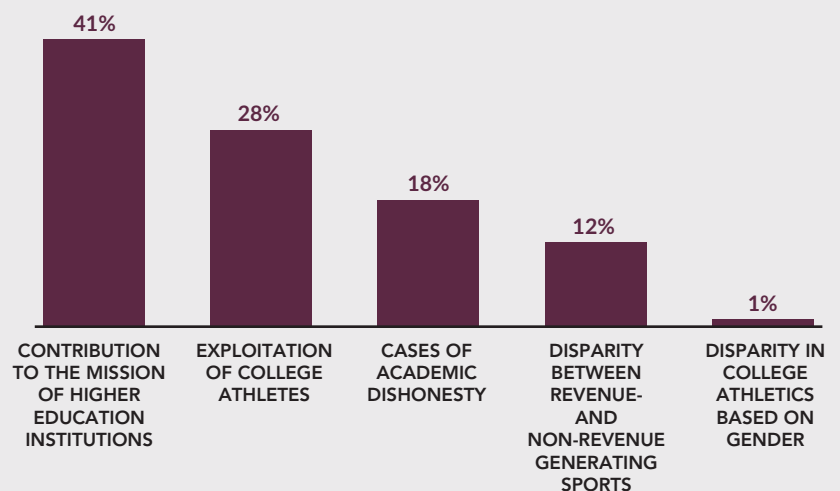
**The contribution of athletics to the mission of higher education institutions is an important issue facing higher education.**

About 41% of all respondents—and 50% of respondents with at least some direct connection to athletics—ranked contribution to institutional mission as the most important issue pertaining to college athletics. One leader described this concern, stating that “the academic enterprise” is being hurt by “the disconnect between athletics and the inability of the faculty to manage and monitor it.”

Another leader wrote:

*College sports play a huge role in American culture, but little to no role in the education of college students.*

FIG. 4 Top-ranked issue facing higher education with regard to college athletics



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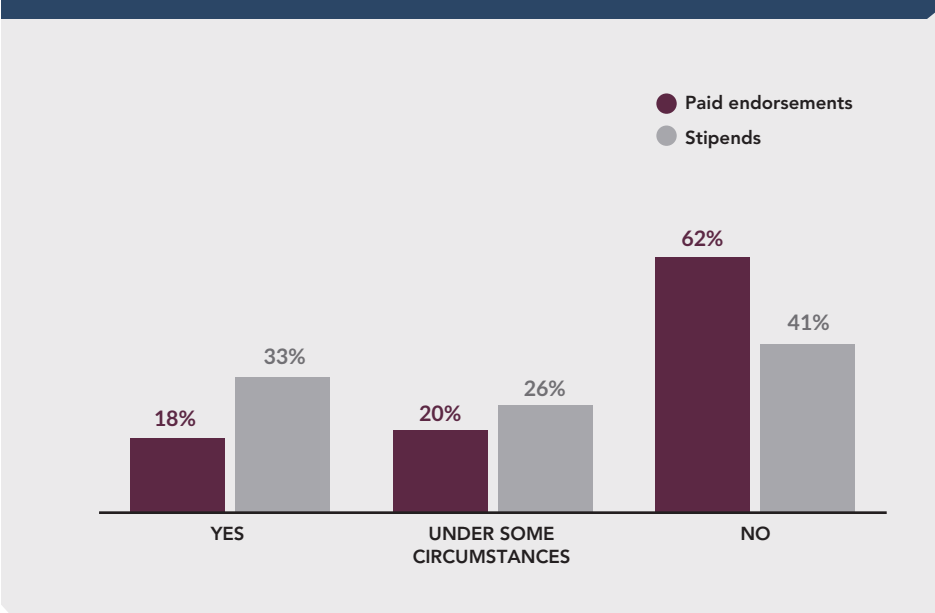
**Most higher education leaders do not believe that college student athletes should be able to receive paid endorsements.**

Regardless of direct connection to athletics in their current position, most respondents (62% overall) believe that college student athletes should not be able to receive paid endorsements.

**More higher education leaders are open to giving college student athletes stipends.**

Only 41% of respondents believe that college student athletes should not be able to receive paid stipends. The share of respondents who believe that college student athletes should not receive paid stipends is somewhat higher among those with at least some direct connection to college athletics than among those with no direct connection (47% versus 38% overall).

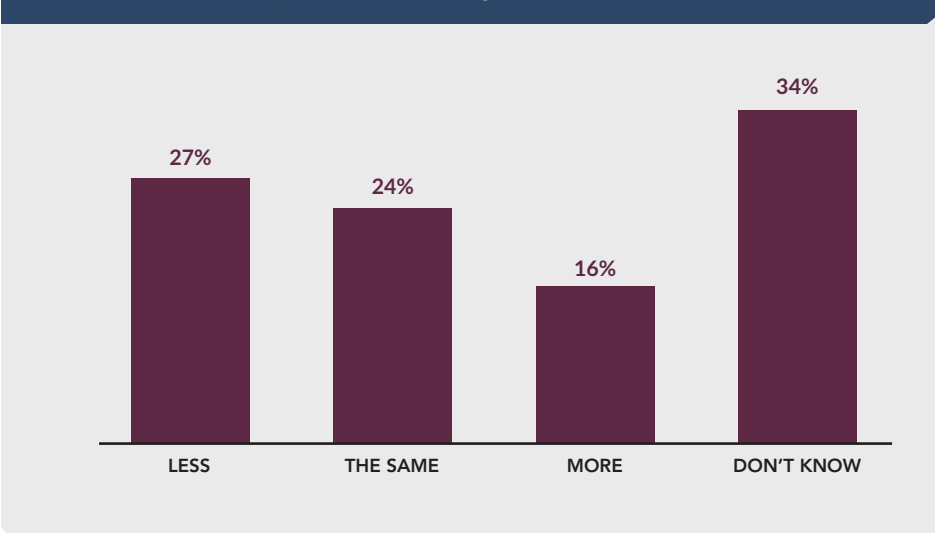
FIG. 5 Agreement that college athletes should be able to receive paid endorsements



**Few respondents believe that the NCAA should grant more authority to athletic conferences.**

Only 16% of all respondents—and only 21% of respondents with at least some direct connection to athletics—agree that the NCAA should grant more authority to athletic conferences to make their own rules. About 27% of respondents believe that the NCAA should grant athletic conferences less authority. About a third of respondents report not knowing if the level of authority should change.

FIG. 6 Level of authority the NCAA should grant athletic conferences



## INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS: AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

**Funding for athletics has increased at many higher education institutions.**

Nearly half (42%) of respondents who work at higher education institutions report that funding for athletic facilities and programs has increased at their institution over the past five years.

About 10% of respondents report that funding has declined. One respondent urges caution in interpreting this finding, noting the difference between “funding” and “spending:”

*At my institution, athletics spending is up every year—the cost of scholarships goes with the increase in tuition, compensation costs (even with salary freezes) go up because benefit costs go up, etc. If “funding” has stayed flat or “declined,” what that really means is that the non-compensation, non-scholarship portion of the operating budget allocated to athletics has remained flat or not increased. That is much different than a true decline or decrease.*

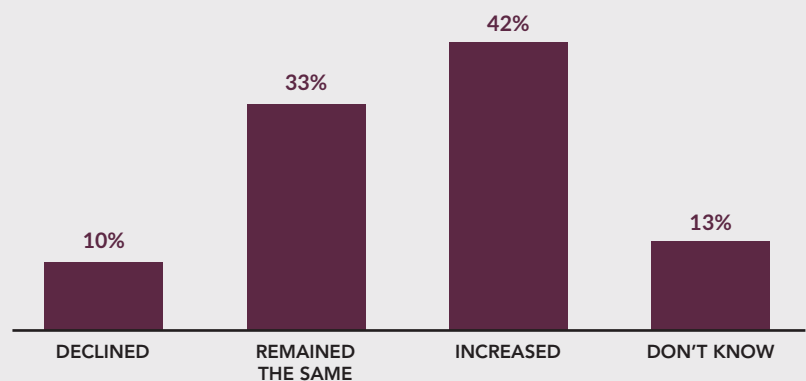
Another leader describes the strong forces that are driving the costs of athletics up—and the negative consequences of allocating more resources to athletics:

*Our most pressing issues are the spiraling (upward) pressures—facilities, coaching staff, multiple/ longer seasons—that must be maintained to be competitive but that add, best I can tell, nothing to the value of the student experience and in fact draw institutional resources and time of students away from other activities. Does having tenths of a second on a shot clock—an NCAA regulation a few years ago—add anything to the value of the student experience? Help attract student-athletes? No. But we needed to upgrade scoreboards to comply nonetheless...*

Some higher education leaders also raise questions about the sustainability of continued growth in spending on athletics. In the words of one leader:

*As CFO, I see the costs keep escalating for athletics. It is an arms race—with each institution's reputation, ability to recruit, etc. tied to the ability to run a program that is equal, if not better than its peers. Athletic Directors and coaches keep making the argument they need more, more, more to keep up. At our institution, the athletics budget has increased 12% ANNUALLY on average for the last 20 years, while actual tuition and fees have only grown on average 5.5%... These increases at our small institution (6,000 students) are unsustainable.*

**FIG. 7** Change in funding for athletic facilities and programs over the past five years (among respondents working at higher education institutions)



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**About This Poll**

We invited alumni of the Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania to participate in the poll (n = 243); 151 individuals responded during the eight-day period in which the poll was open (November 11 to November 19, 2014). The poll included 11 questions and was estimated to require no more than 10 minutes to complete.

This report describes responses from all respondents. Most of these individuals (58%) are leaders of private not-for-profit four-year institutions. About 17% are leaders of public four-year institutions, 3% are from private for-profit four-year institutions, 3% are from public two-year institutions, and 2% are in administrative units (system offices). About 17% are not working for a college or university. Half (48%) of the respondents who are working for a college or university are in administrative roles, 33% are in academic positions, 10% in finance positions, and 10% in student affairs. About 13% of respondents reported having a strong direct connection to or responsibility for college athletics, 26% reported having some connection to or responsibility for college athletics, and 49% reported little or no direct connection to or responsibility for college athletics.

**Suggested citation**

Perna, L. W. (December 2014). *Intercollegiate Athletics* (What's AHEAD: Key Trends in Higher Education No. 4). Philadelphia, PA: Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.

**About AHEAD**

The **Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD)** is dedicated to promoting the public purposes of higher education in fostering open, equitable, and democratic societies. Located within the Graduate School of Education of the University of Pennsylvania, AHEAD applies what is known from our research and others to improve institutional practice and public policy through technical assistance and professional development activities. For more information see: [www.ahead-penn.org](http://www.ahead-penn.org)