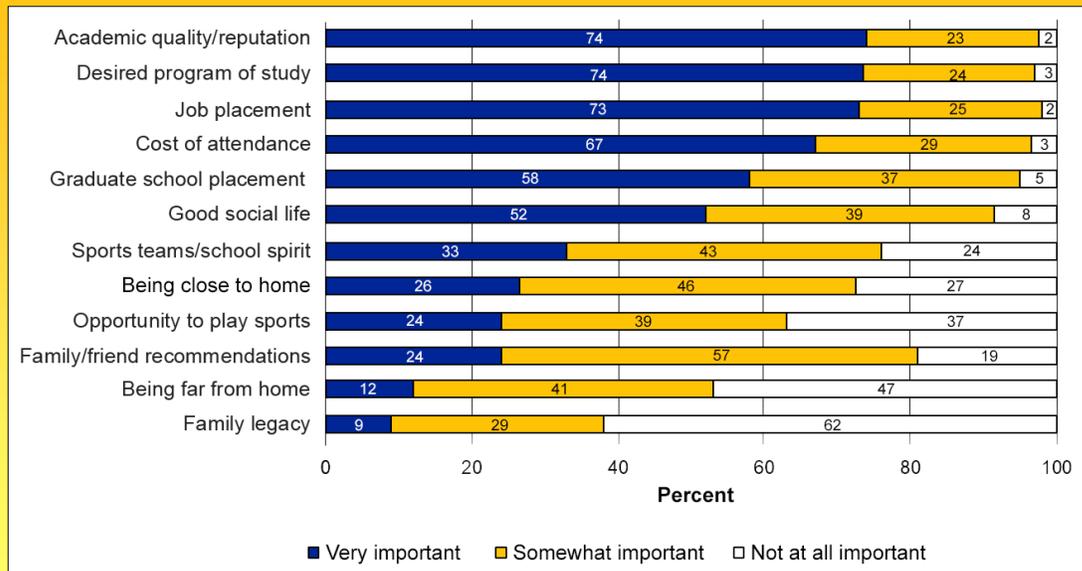


Why Students Select a College or a University

FIGURE 1. Percentage distribution of students' ratings of the importance of factors that influence college choice among fall 2009 ninth-graders in spring 2012



NOTE: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09) First Follow-up Public-Use Data File (NCES 2014-358).

At a very high percentage of both public and private universities academic budgets are under strain because of all sorts of expenditures on non-academic programs, initiatives, and enterprises. One of the largest of these expenditures is typically on intercollegiate athletics, and the athletics budgets almost never include spending on stadiums, arenas, and other sports facilities. And at all but 50 to 75 universities, athletics programs require institutional subsidies—revenues, and often very substantial revenues, that are being diverted from academic programs and support.

When I say “diverted from,” I mean that they might just as easily have been spent on academic programs and academic support if institutional priorities were less skewed. Supporters of the spending on intercollegiate athletics will point to the percentages of students who would like to play sports in college or simply to attend athletic events to have a sense of school spirit. But given that a half-dozen other considerations are more important to much larger numbers of prospective students, it is fair to ask where institutions are getting the greatest return on investment. After all, commentators on higher education are increasingly asking students to consider ROI in choosing both the institutions that they to attend and the programs in which they major.

Imagine if the money spent on intercollegiate athletics were available to be spent on the enhancement of existing academic programs or the development of new programs.

Imagine if it were available to attract excellent faculty—or, less grandiosely, simply to provide more full-time faculty positions and to reduce the exploitation of adjunct faculty who are seeking such positions. Imagine if it were available to provide much more extensive placement services for employment or graduate school. And, perhaps most fundamentally, imagine if it were available to provide more numerous and more substantial scholarships based both on merit and on need.

I am not inherently antagonistic toward athletics, and I do not think that most faculty are inherently antagonistic toward athletics. But I am increasingly exasperated that institutional revenues are being misdirected and academic spending is being squeezed to support not just athletics but administrative bloat, construction projects and other real-estate purchases, and all sorts of non-academic initiatives and enterprises promoted as sources of additional enrollment or other revenue streams. Although our recent and current experience at Wright State has been an extreme illustration, this non-academic spending is a very widespread, if not universal, problem.

It's not just that university finances are under strain. It is, instead, the case that efforts to address this issue seem almost always to exacerbate it, rather than to address it effectively. And then the easiest solution seems almost always to be to cut academic spending yet again. Since teaching and research produce almost all institutional revenue, these sorts of decisions are not just counter-intuitive but ultimately so self-defeating that they warrant being described as self-cannibalizing.

For all of the focus on defining mission and developing strategic plans, our colleges and universities have been losing their sense of purpose. Our profession is being undermined, and the quality of the educations that we provide to our students is being eroded. And all of this is occurring even as the dramatic reductions in state support for public colleges and universities, in combination with ill-considered non-academic spending, is requiring students to take on increasing levels of debt in order to get an education that, ideally, is supposed to enhance their future possibilities—to lead to “better life” in all senses of that phrase.