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SUNY Weighs the Value of Division I Sports

By [KATIE THOMAS](#)

New York's state university system is among the largest in the country, but it has never been known for athletic prominence, unlike major public institutions in states like Florida, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

SUNY officials aimed to change that in 1986, when the trustees lifted a ban on athletic scholarships and cleared the way for the system's four research universities — Buffalo, Stony Brook, Albany and Binghamton — to upgrade their sports programs.

Buffalo led the way to Division I in 1991, ending New York's distinction as the only state system in the country, other than Alaska's, not competing at the highest level of intercollegiate sports. Since then, tens of millions of dollars have been invested toward the effort by New York State and the institutions themselves. Yet nearly two decades after the migration started, there is no clear consensus as to whether this project is an all-around success.

Certain SUNY teams have risen on a national stage — Buffalo's football team played in a bowl game for the first time in January, and Albany and Binghamton have qualified for the exclusive and lucrative [N.C.A.A.](#) men's basketball tournament. But there have also been public embarrassments along the way, none more glaring than at Binghamton, which is facing an athletics scandal that has drawn national headlines. The university is under investigation by the state's former chief judge.

Now, with the university system facing a proposed \$90 million cut in state financing, some are questioning whether the emphasis on athletics is misguided. Assemblyman Peter M. Rivera, a Democrat from the Bronx, said state money should not be spent on building athletic powerhouses.

"That's not the purpose of a SUNY school," he said. "The purpose of a SUNY school is to provide the best education possible."

Those who defend the move to Division I say that the benefits of high-profile sports programs, like other aspects of higher education, are difficult to measure.

"I suppose you can say that the universities are all looking toward intangible goals in terms of student education," said Shirley Strum Kenny, who helped bring Division I sports to Stony Brook as its president from 1994 until her retirement this year. "There's very little way to measure it, unless you're going to wait 40 years."

Even if the benefits are not easy to assess, they are real to Warde Manuel, the Buffalo athletic director, who arrived at the university in 2005. Manuel had left a job as an associate athletic director at Michigan and said

he was stunned to see more Buffalo students wearing Michigan, Syracuse and [Notre Dame](#) sweatshirts than their own school colors. “There was a sense of apathy, a sense of ‘we can’t win,’ ” he said.

Since then, Manuel said, the change has been palpable. Even though Buffalo’s football team is 3-7 this season, its International Bowl appearance has generated enthusiasm on campus. “I think now there’s an expectation that we will win,” he said.

The scandal at Binghamton highlights the way intangible sports benefits so sought after by university administrators — like increased visibility and buzz — can backfire. The university [is facing an investigation by the State University of New York](#) into accusations that it bent its academic standards to build a competitive men’s basketball team. Three of the team’s players have been arrested in the past three years, including one in September on charges of selling crack cocaine. This fall, six players were dismissed from the team. The athletic director has resigned, the basketball coach has been placed on paid leave, and university administrators have been accused of retaliating against an instructor who said she was pressured to show grading favoritism to athletes.

Binghamton’s president, Lois B. DeFleur, declined to comment on the investigation but said that over all, the move to Division I had enhanced the university’s ties to its students as well as to the surrounding community. “The bulk of the people put a terrible event in perspective with the overall university and its other programs and what’s going on,” she said.

The adjustment has been painful at the other universities as well. In 1999, the N.C.A.A. placed Buffalo’s men’s basketball team on probation for recruiting violations. The N.C.A.A. has also cited Buffalo’s football team for the players’ poor academic performance. In 2006, three Albany football players were arrested on charges of raping a fellow student and were dismissed from the university. And in 2005, the N.C.A.A. placed Stony Brook on three years’ probation for a series of minor violations involving more than 50 athletes. The N.C.A.A. cited the university for a “lack of institutional control,” removed 12 ½ scholarships for two years, and said Stony Brook had been “ill-equipped” to handle the transition.

Supporters of SUNY’s move to Division I caution patience, noting that building a successful athletics tradition takes time.

“What you’re seeing is typical growing pains,” said Patrick Nero, commissioner of the America East Conference, to which Albany, Binghamton and Stony Brook belong. He declined to comment on the Binghamton investigation, but said of SUNY’s transition to Division I, “I really do believe that in 10 to 20 years, I think time will show that they will be successful programs.”

The transition to high-level athletics began in the 1980s, when administrators at Buffalo were looking to raise visibility and establish a rallying point for the university, which had a sprawling campus and a large number of commuter students. Buffalo and the other state universities, which range from 15,000 to 30,000 students, were large research institutions, yet they competed against small, private colleges. SUNY’s 12 smaller four-year colleges with athletic teams continue to play in Division III.

“At Division III, we were playing institutions that simply were not of our type,” recalled William R. Greiner, who served as Buffalo’s president from 1991 until 2004. “It was simply a peculiarity, our athletics program.”

Buffalo entered Division I in 1991 and in 1999 moved to the top N.C.A.A. division, I-A, now known as the Football Bowl Subdivision. The same year, Stony Brook and Albany joined Division I-AA, now known as the Football Championship Subdivision. Binghamton was the final university to upgrade its program, moving to Division I in 2001. Unlike the other three universities, it has no football team.

Because universities changed the way they report athletic finances in 2003, it is difficult to compare spending over time. But athletic spending at the four universities has increased over the last few years, according to annual financial data reported to the N.C.A.A.

Binghamton's operating expenses increased 79 percent from 2003-4 to 2007-8, to \$17.73 million. The increase was similar at Albany, where expenditures rose to \$13.34 million from \$7.49 million over the same period. Stony Brook's spending increased 87 percent, to \$22.07 million from \$11.80 million. And Buffalo, which has been in Division I the longest, increased spending by 22 percent, to \$21.85 million from \$17.86 million.

While ticket sales, student fees, private donations and other revenues help pay for athletics, the universities' contribution has grown in recent years. At Albany, the university subsidy to athletics increased 77 percent, to \$6.7 million in 2007-8 from \$3.8 million in 2003-4. During the same period, Binghamton's contribution rose 47 percent, to \$3.1 million from \$2.1 million. Buffalo contributed \$7.5 million to athletics in 2007-8, a 31 percent increase over 2003-4, when it provided \$5.7 million.

Stony Brook calculates its contribution differently than the other SUNY members, but officials said its subsidy totaled \$8.5 million in 2007-8, a 119 percent increase over the \$3.9 million contributed in 2003-4. The large increase was a result of a one-time payment by the university to relieve the athletic department of its debts in 2007-8, officials said.

Two of the universities have benefited from connections to powerful state senators. In 2002, Stony Brook completed construction on a football stadium that is named for State Senator Kenneth P. LaValle, the former chairman of the chamber's higher education committee, who helped procure the \$22 million in state money used to build it. The [Binghamton University](#) Events Center, an all-purpose arena where the Bearcats play basketball, opened in 2004 and cost the state \$33 million. The financing was secured with the help of a local senator, Thomas W. Libous.

Tangible results of the moves have been hard to quantify. Applications to Albany, which played in the N.C.A.A. men's basketball tournament in 2006 and 2007, have increased by 21 percent since 2006, but applications to the other three universities also rose during that period.

At Stony Brook, Jim Fiore, the athletic director, said the upgraded sports program contributed to changes that include a 93 percent increase in applications and a jump in test scores of the freshman class since 1999.

But some university officials and experts in intercollegiate athletics cautioned against drawing too many conclusions, noting that several factors affect statistics like applications and enrollment.

At a public university, [application and enrollment rates are often a function of the economy](#) as families opt for lower tuition in a recession. And [several economic studies](#) over the past decade — including some commissioned by the N.C.A.A. — have shown little or no link between investing in big-time athletics and

success in other areas.

Jonathan Orszag, an economist who has evaluated for the N.C.A.A. the [financial impact of moving to Division I](#), said that if the intangible benefits were significant enough, “you should expect some of that to be reflected in the financial data.” An increase in school spirit or heightened visibility should translate to higher application rates, for example. “And during the period that we’re studying, we didn’t observe it,” he said.

This investment in athletics comes at a difficult time for the SUNY system, which has weathered [\\$334 million in budget cuts since 2008](#) and is facing an additional \$90 million reduction proposed by Gov. [David A. Paterson](#). Athletic directors at the universities said they had not been immune to budget cuts and had taken measures to reduce costs, like not filling open positions.

University officials also noted that athletic spending makes up a relatively small proportion of the universities’ overall budgets — no more than 5 percent in 2007-8.

“We’ve had a lot of success in a short period of time,” said Lee McElroy, the Albany athletic director. McElroy said he was not looking to make Albany into the next [Ohio State](#) or [U.C.L.A.](#), adding, “The goal is to operate our program within the confines of our resources, and to do it with the same mission and the same plan and the same purpose that we’ve always done.”

An earlier version referred incorrectly to the person investigating the Binghamton University sports program. Though unidentified in the article, she is Judith S. Kaye, New York State's former chief judge; she is not the state's former chief justice.

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