



THE IMPACT OF COLLEGE CONFERENCE TV NETWORKS AND TELEVISION PROLIFERATION ON COLLEGE FOOTBALL ATTENDANCE

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https://video.syr.edu/media/t/1_3zvy8lvj

Two key trends have materialized in college football over the past two decades: massive growth in live-game coverage and content and declining in-stadium attendance. This project aims to identify if there is a causal relationship between these trends—are declines in attendance caused by increased access to college sporting events on television? Does television act as a substitute or complement to in-person attendance? This is especially important at the collegiate level where ticket sales and other game day revenues make up a significant portion of total revenues. Another key element is the launch of conference networks, the ACC Network for example, and their potential role in this decline. The results of this study should be encouraging to ACC member institutions: appearing on television has a positive impact on attendance. This effect is greatest when appearing on a broadcast or basic tier network, and the implementation and existence of conference networks seem to have no negative effect on attendance. When diagnosing the causes of live game attendance, television proliferation does not seem to be the proximate cause.

Declining College Football Attendance

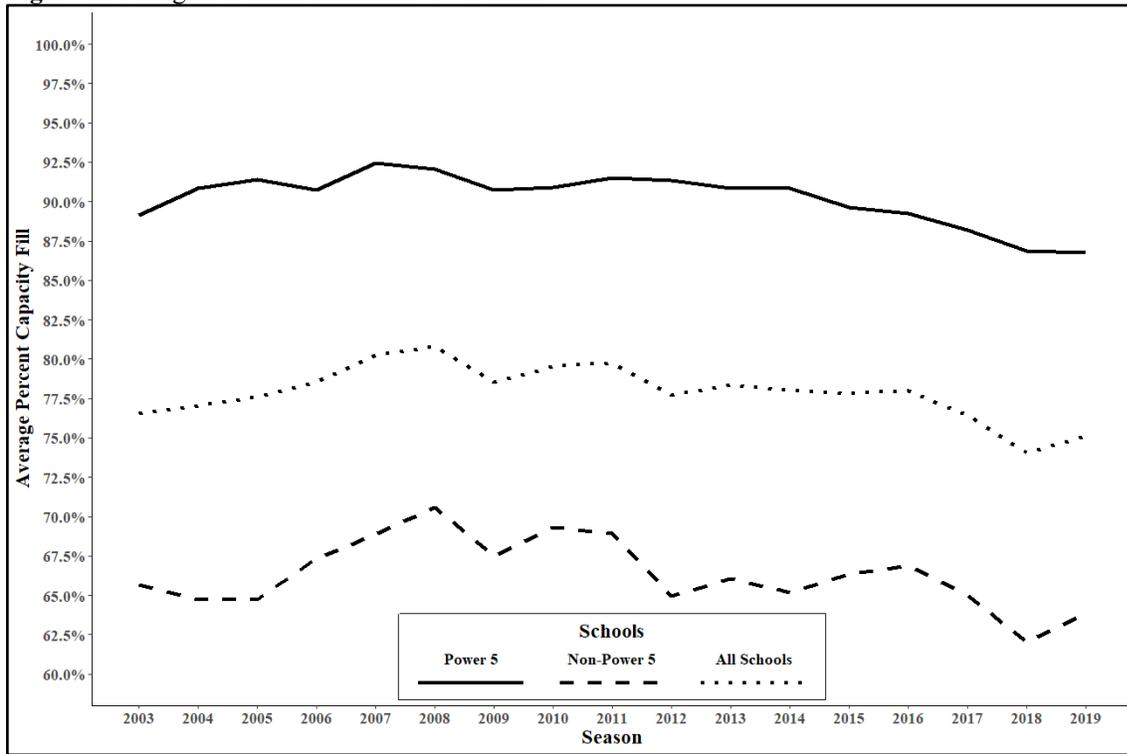
Figure 1 illustrates the decline in stadium utilization rate (announced attendance divided by published capacity) across all levels of FBS football. This trend is also prevalent in the ACC. Schools currently in the ACC sold out in just over 34% of their collective games in 2003 (the first year of our sample). The last time that rate has been above 20% was in 2010 (20.6%), with low marks since of 10.8% (2013) and 11.5% (2018), and a recent rate of 18.3% (2019, the most recent season in our sample). Total attendance and stadium utilization rates mimic a similar trend.

Declining in-stadium attendance could have monetary consequences for ACC institutions. Total athletic revenue continues to increase, in part due to the increased value of television deals. However, according to the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, ticket sales and other game day revenues account for between 18% and 27% of all college athletic revenues generated by ACC schools in 2019.¹ There are also other indirect benefits to “packing the house” that may impact school recognition, improve community and student gratification, and prompt donor contributions.

¹ The Knight Commission attributes 18% to tickets sales and 9% to “Other Revenues” which include compensation and benefits provided by a third party, game program, novelty, parking and concession sales, sport camps and clinics, athletics restricted endowment, and other investment and operating revenue categories. This data only includes public institutions that make this data available publicly.

http://cafidatabase.knightcommission.org/fbs/acc#!quicktabs-tab-where_the_money-1

Figure 1: College Football Attendance Over Time



Television Proliferation and Attendance

A major shift in college football over the past two decades has been the increasing number of broadcasts. In 2003, 45.6% of the games in our sample were not broadcasted. That is down to just 1.6% in 2019. While the percentages of games available on broadcast networks such as ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC and on basic tier networks such as ESPN, ESPN2, FS1, and NBCSN, among others, have remained relatively static during this time, the percentage of games available on premium tier networks has skyrocketed. This category, which includes networks typically only available as an add-on to a cable subscription such as ESPNU, CBSSN, and the various conference networks, among others, barely existed in 2003 (0.4% of games), but accounted for over a third of games in 2019 (34.8%). Also growing in prevalence are games appearing via streaming platform only. The growth in these two broadcast categories has led to increased availability of college football. In fact, every home game hosted by an ACC school over the last decade has been broadcasted live.

This project considers the impact of live coverage on game-day attendance to college football games, using a panel data set covering all home FBS college football games between 2003 and 2019. Measures of attendance include announced stadium attendance and stadium utilization rate, utilizing data acquired from ESPN box scores, school media guides, and Wikipedia (when other data was not available). Initial results examine the impact of appearing on broadcast network, basic tier network, premium tier network, regional network only, online stream only, and pay-per-view (more prevalent earlier in the sample). These results control for the quality of the teams playing, uncertainty of outcome, weather, stadium attributes, distance



between schools, day of week and month, local economic factors, school specific factors, and competition from other major sporting and entertainment events. Transformed point estimates from a log-linear attendance fixed effects specification show attendance increases of 14.7% when the game is on a broadcast network, 14.1% increase when the game is on a basic tier network, 9.7% increase when the game is on a premium tier network, and 6.4% increase when the game is only available via an online streaming service (all results are compared to the hypothetical of not being broadcasted). One common occurrence among ACC schools is to play games on Thursday or Friday night to have more eyes playing on national television when significantly fewer games are played. Results show that while attendance does decline on Thursday and Friday nights relative to Saturday early afternoon games, this negative effect is less than the positive attendance benefits gained from appearing on national television.

Another television element of interest is the launch of conference networks. Four of the Power 5 conferences have launched conference networks over the past 15 years, with the ACC being the most recent prior to the start of the 2019–20 season. Utilizing a difference-in-difference model with average season attendance as the variable of interest, there is no evidence that the introduction of conference networks had any impact (positive or negative). Splitting by the more established conference networks (Big 10, Pac-12, SEC) brought mixed results. While a negative effect was identified in the Pac-12 (-12.3% decline in average per game attendance post the introduction of the Pac-12 Network), no statistically significant effect was identified in the Big 10 or SEC. Considering just one year of data for the ACC with the implementation of the conference network (2019), early results show no effect on attendance for ACC institutions per game attendance.

Implications and Further Research

Ultimately, there is no evidence to suggest that conference networks or television in general are the causes for the decline in college football attendance. Instead, declines in attendance have been seen across college football for both Power 5 and non-Power 5 schools. In fact, appearances on national television seem to have a complementary effect on attendance. There are several potential reasons for this. First, contracts between networks and conferences usually have a specified amount of promotion that the networks must provide to build awareness of upcoming games. This broadcast promotion may create advertising benefits that increase awareness and demand for the game. Second, there may be a prestige effect associated with attending games that are nationally televised. Many people are watching the game, more than a non-nationally televised game, but only a restricted number of people (restricted by capacity and access and ability to afford tickets) can attend live. These results, while not identifying the cause or causes for the decline in attendance, do rule out television proliferation as a potential suspect.

Our research team is also currently examining the effects of television on college basketball attendance. College basketball games sell out at a much lower rate compared to college football. There are also significantly more home games, which provides more opportunities to identify causal relationships. While initial results suggest that television is not the proximate cause for declines in college football attendance, college basketball consumers may have different preferences and behavioral differences.