

September 16, 2020

The Empire Struck Back

This morning the Big Ten Presidents reversed an August 11 decision to postpone the Fall football season. From this morning's *New York Times*:

In a statement on Wednesday morning, the league [Big Ten] said players, coaches, trainers and others who are on playing and practice fields would undergo daily testing for the virus, and that any player who tested positive would be barred from games for at least 21 days.

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/world/covid-19-coronavirus.html>)

Other sources have noted that the availability of "quick testing" for athletes provides methods and information that were not available when the Conference made their initial decision not to play in Fall 2020. From the *Detroit Free Press*,

The COVID-19 testing will be for players, coaches, trainers and others who are on the field for practices and games. Test results must be completed and recorded prior to each practice or game. Players who test positive for the coronavirus through point-of-contact (POC) daily testing would require a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test to confirm the result of the POC test, per the league. (<https://www.freep.com/story/sports/college/2020/09/16/big-ten-football-update-vote-2020/5814647002/>)

This is a health economics blog. One economic question is what this COVID-19 testing will cost. A second economic question is what it would cost if it were given to all of the students on campus, including those who are currently locked up in quarantine? Will the tuba player in the marching band be given the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test? Will the humanities scholar in the library stacks be included in this testing protocol?

Your blogger is an alumnus of The University of Michigan so he thinks in those terms. As noted above, if this protocol is good for The University of Michigan football team, is it being offered to all U of M students in Ann Arbor? or Flint? or Dearborn? Is it being offered to U of M faculty and staff? If not, why not?

YB is an empiricist. He found the following data on COVID-19 tests from maps in the *New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/covid-college-cases-tracker.html>), as of September 10.

Illinois	1,760	Penn State	322
Iowa	1,616	Maryland	287
Ohio State	1,528	Indiana	286
Wisconsin	1,097	Michigan State	179
Nebraska	504	Minnesota	124
Michigan	344	Rutgers	91
Purdue	322	Northwestern	73

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It is ironic that Iowa, Ohio State, and Nebraska, ranked #2, #3, and #5 in number of cases (college football loves rankings), led the public outcry for playing football.

The universities have brought students back to campus, only then to impose quarantines on them. These students are apparently not being given rapid testing. According to accounts too numerous to mention, at many universities (including U of M) they are being dumped into quarantine dorms, often without adequate supplies, supervision, or guidance.

We know why this is happening. In the 1960s many universities chose to allow their athletic departments to “sink or swim”. Largely cutting them loose to make their own deals led to the creation of athletic empires at Michigan, Ohio State, and many other Big Ten schools. Since then, fans have packed the football stadiums and the basketball arenas (no one pays much to watch swimming meets). In 2020, coaches get multimillion-dollar contracts and have large well-paid staffs. The economics are simple – make a lot of money and run your own empire.

According to Big Ten rules, the University Presidents make the decisions. On August 11, the Presidents tried to act like the adults in the room. On September 16, to borrow from *Star Wars*, “The Empire Struck Back”.

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