WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY's STUDENT ENROLLMENT:
A LUNAR INFLUENCE?*

by

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*We gratefully acknowledge helpful comments and suggestions from some of our colleagues, but we are complying with their request to remain completely and totally anonymous.
Summary

We believe that the traditional university method of accounting for student enrollments is inadequate for decision-making purposes. Consequently, we have developed an alternative model for predicting student enrollment during the 90's. We believe this new model will be gratefully and gladly received. Not only is it simple to understand; it is easy to implement. Given the governor's commitment to "tax avoidance" (not "tax evasion," as he has clearly explained), Western can expect little new revenue. Hence it is most significant that this lunar model for enhancing student enrollment involves no financial commitment on the part of the university. Indeed, if fully implemented it will permit considerable savings in current university outlays.

The lunar model for enrollment enhancement stands in stark contrast to the findings of a recent report of some professors from the Department of Economics, which proposes maintaining a costly intercollegiate athletic program for its "enrollment enticing effects on non-athletes" ("Western Kentucky University's Athletic Program: Financial Burden or Boon?" by Robert Pulsinelli, Melvin V. Borland, and Brian L. Goff, from the "Summary"). According to these professors, "the men's football team and the men's basketball team attracted about 1459 non-athletes who brought revenue to the University in tuition and state appropriations" (ibid.). The major drawback to their plan
is that in order to attract all these non-athletes, the university has to have an athletic program.

By contrast, the model we are proposing has all the advantages of being an obvious, proven enrollment enhancing factor and it involves none of the drawbacks of incurring a $2,191,477 annual cost. (Since our proposal does not require any athletic program we have not questioned this figure but have simply accepted the economists' account of the cost of the athletic program.)

Section I. Introduction

In recent years colleges have found themselves competing more and more for a limited number of students. This is a nationwide phenomenon, and Western Kentucky is no exception.

In this report no attempt is made to come to grips with all (or even most) of the issues affecting enrollment. Instead, we concentrate on one enrollment enhancing factor which has traditionally been overlooked, but which surpasses even athletics as a student enticing factor. Because of the simplicity of the model offered here, we are confident that if it is adopted by Western, others will recognize its merit, and schools across the country will follow Western's example.
Section II. The Model

Before explaining the details of the model it is important to understand that this model does not make any causal claim. Although it is an enrollment enticement or enrollment enhancement model, there is no claim being made that the factor isolated in the model actually causes the increase in enrollment that has been noted. It is a purely predictive model. We are satisfied with noting a correlation between enrollment and this factor and we leave speculation concerning the specific causal links involved to others. After all, for administrative decisions it is sufficient to know that two factors correlate, and there is no need to understand how and why they correlate, just as a person can drive a car without knowing how its engine and transmission work.

The proposed model is very simple. We have dubbed it "the lunar influence model." It is based on a very simple set of relationships which, so far as we know, has escaped the attention of political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, and even school admissions officers, who have been studying the factors determining the decision of young persons to attend college and their choice of college.

We have found that the date of fall registration is very significant. There is, we discovered, a significant relationship between the phases of the moon, the date of registration, and the
increase in enrollment for each year. The closer registration falls to new moon, but still before it (after new moon there is a sharp decline in effect) the greater the increase in enrollment. This is a pattern which holds from 1960 to 1989, with a few minor exceptions, as one would expect, but still clearly enough what there is no doubt about the overall relationship. (For those interested in more detail, we will provide data and information to show how we factored out the systematic factor of increased enrollment across Kentucky colleges and Universities in general. Since we used the same method as the economists, you can also contact them. For the rest, get out your old calendars and check the dates of the various phases of the moon. We did it; you can do it too. Above all, please do not call the astronomers at the Planetarium, because they are busy supplying information gratis to the public and do not have time to assist faculty with lunar research. The Office of Public Information is also extremely busy. Currently they are searching Western’s archives trying to substantiate a rumor about a golden age when Western had winning basketball teams. So please do not request enrollment information from them.)

The lunar model was tested for lagged values. It was discovered that the best value was the one indicated, new moon. Its significance may not be immediately apparent. The important thing to realize is that new moon comes exactly two weeks after full moon. Once this is recognized, then everything else is
clear, indeed intuitively obvious. Our reasoning runs as follows: the theory of lunar influence asserts that as the moon is waxing, libido also waxes; as the moon wanes, libido wanes. Thus if the moon is full on the date of registration, libido may peak at that time, but it is too late to register and join the fun. Hence, the two-week lag time. This allows enough time for libidinous-motivated actions to be undertaken, that is, for a moonstruck person to enroll for classes. Clearly, timing is of the utmost significance here, for if the registration date is too distant, a loss of urgency is felt, procrastination sets in, and the prospective student never acts on his or her moon-aroused desire; if the registration date is too close, the pressure of getting everything together so soon overwhelms the libidinous impulse—hence the sharp decline if registration is less than two weeks before full moon.

Section III. Advantages of the Model

1. A major advantage of the model proposed here is its simplicity. Correlations between phases of the moon, dates of registration, and the relative increase in student enrollment are easy to document. Like others, we believe that with complicated analyses there is a greater possibility for error and even deception. Indeed, through complicated theories we can sometimes even deceive ourselves, so that results no one in their right
mind would find plausible are defended with all seriousness because some arcane theory or model produced them. We will have nothing to do with such ivory tower folly. In this regard we agree completely with Mark Twain who observed, "There are lies, damned lies, and statistics." Our model stays away from the temptations of complex calculations and presents only the plain, unvarnished truth.

2. There is an unflinching honesty about this theory. Some persons are predisposed to deny the impact of the libido on our decision making. They seek to discredit such theories by labelling them, calling them "Freudian." Our response is that if Freud discovered the truth then we can do no better than to agree with Freud. But our theory goes beyond Freud by noting that there is an objective correlate to the rise and fall of libido. (We regard the attempt of the WKU economists to give athletics a consumption role as an example of preferring to attribute behavior to a socially acceptable reason rather than admitting what is really the case.)

3. As already mentioned above, the lunar model has an enormous financial advantage. As compared to the model recently proposed by some WKU economists, it will not require the funding of an athletic program in order to maintain student enrollment. Since athletic programs will be superfluous, considerable moneys will be freed for many much needed projects around campus. Some could
be used to replace obsolete equipment. Of course, there are other justifications for athletics, such as community entertainment, so it should not be assumed that the savings will automatically be realized.

4. This model requires no contrary-to-fact assumptions. In this regard it contrasts sharply with the recent report of the economists. For example, they begin by writing, "Assume that WKU is a business enterprise..." (op. cit., p. 2). This is about as plausible as saying, "Assume that General Motors is a university," or "Assume that Exxon has the same goals as the Sierra Club," or "Assume that, appearances to the contrary, Wallace Wilkinson's first priority really is education," or "Assume that the moon is made of green cheese," etc. Making assumptions is fun. We can assume absolutely anything. However, by asking their readers to assume at the very beginning what is patently not true, the economists have strained their credibility and stretched the patience of their readers. The lunar model requires no such untested or contrary-to-fact assumptions. (See the Appendix for additional comment on the economists' assumptions.)

5. Some readers may wonder why, if lunar influences are so significant, this was not mentioned by students in an informal survey conducted by WKU's History Department this fall. The first thing to be said about such a survey is that it is not
scientific. It is merely a subjective report of socially acceptable reasons for attending Western. The students in those history classes were in a context where they knew that it would not be acceptable to admit that they came to Western because at a certain point they felt horny. The closest any of them dared to come to admitting this fact, even to themselves, is seen in the few who courageously admitted that they came because of a boy friend or a girl friend.

6. Corroborative evidence for the lunar-libidinal theory of student motivation can be found by observing the activities of students on Thursday evenings. But perhaps the less said about this the better, because a detailed account might offend tender minds. A radical might question the wisdom of recruiting and admitting libidinally motivated students—as some question the wisdom of the venerable practice of recruiting academically ineligible athletes.

7. Objective evidence of the significance of lunar influences is found in the fact that study after study has shown that even though many physicists and astronomers currently have doubts about this view, the vast majority of people continue to read their daily horoscope. Indeed, in recent years a prominent politician on the national scene even had his calendar arranged according to this influence. If such a popular, prominent official takes these influences into account, who are we to
question them. What more objective evidence for astral influence could one ask for! The reality of lunar influence is beyond question. (For recent bibliography, see The National Enquirer or the forthcoming book of our friend Joan Quigley.)

8. Some readers probably associate the theory of lunar influences with Ptolemy and an outdated astronomy. Whether one finds this theory plausible or not is of no significance for the model. The model does not claim a direct test of a causal link between the phases of the moon and enrollment at registration. "A finding of correlation between variables does not necessarily imply causation" (Pulsinelli, et al., op. cit., p. 19). In this regard our model is exactly like that of the economists. Like them, we note an enrollment enticing effect and we remain content with this fact. We claim no causal link, but do maintain that it has predictive power. Those persons who make a fetish of causal connections may work out the exact causal links along the lines we have suggested--libidinal impulse, etc. For the purposes of the model it is sufficient to note the fact of the correlation.

9. As noted by the economists in their report, "students attend college for investment purposes (acquiring knowledge and skills,...) and consumption purposes (associations, parties, intramurals, intercollegiate athletics...) [ibid., 19-20]. The difference between our model and theirs is that while theirs requires a highly implausible link between an interest in
athletics and the act of enrolling in an academic institution, ours is based on the rock of biology. We have erected a firm model which is rooted in feelings that every person experiences. There is no doubt about its existence. The strange thing is that the economists go so far as to mention in an oblique way the significant factor which we have isolated—"associations and parties"—but the very abstract and theoretical way in which they speak about this factor indicates that they failed to realize what is really involved. They failed to identify with the typical young person considering student life. They show a grave deficiency in imaginative power. Perhaps the economists have been so busy living the life of the mind that they have lost touch with the body, lost their feel for the excitement and the power of the type of intimate associations so characteristic of student life. (In this regard see also the comments above regarding their tendency to cite only socially acceptable reasons as motivation for actions.)

10. A theory gains power if it is able to explain how the errors of an opposing position arose. In this case the idea of maintaining an athletic program in order to promote university enrollment is so far fetched that it is difficult to see what possible connection the authors might have supposed to exist. Hence it is not easy to explain the origin of the economists' theory. Two possible explanations come to mind, but both must be regarded as highly tentative.
Perhaps like Mammon,

...the least erected spirit that fell
from Heav’n, for ev’n in Heav’n his looks and thoughts
Were always downward bent, admiring more
The riches of Heav’n’s pavement, trodd’n Gold,
Than aught divine or holy else enjoy’d
In vision beatific...

the economists, swayed by love of green and gold, and lacking adequate amounts thereof (since they are teaching at Western), unconsciously substituted the green of stadium grass and the gold of hardwood for the real coin and so fixated on the games played thereon, imagining them to have the potential to bring what they so devoutly desire. (Disavowals of such a motive are to be expected, of course, but must be discounted, since they are merely another example of admitting only socially acceptable motives.) Admittedly, this is quite speculative. Nevertheless, it is one possible explanation of the improbable senario of economists attempting to justify athletics as good business.

A second possible explanation is based on the special sense of well-being experienced through vicarious identification with gridiron and hoop heroes by persons with a specific type of personality configuration. Although some psychologists associate this phenomenon with an adolescent fantasies of omnipotence stimulated by virile young bodies, others attribute it to a high level of imaginative identification, a seeking vicariously for the experience of conquest. In the face of such divergent
accounts, any judgment in this matter remains tentative.

Other explanations are no doubt possible. However, for our model it is not absolutely necessary to prove why an opposing view might have appeared plausible to someone. Indeed, the long-suffering reader might wonder why we have proposed any explanation of the economists' view, since this sounds suspiciously like some version of trying to give the cause of something. To such readers, our initial reply is that we have been catering to the weakness of those who make a fetish of causal connections. For any reader still not satisfied, we simply note that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

11. Finally, it should be mentioned again that the central virtue of the lunar-libido model is its utter simplicity and easy comprehensibility. Everyone who remembers their youth will have a feel for it. Whether this recommends it or not is, of course, another question. It must be remembered that politics is the art of the possible, and the true, simple, and obvious is not always popular and hence not possible.
Appendix

In their report on Western's athletic program, the WKU economists have raised the art of assuming the improbable to new heights. Theirs is one of those extremely rare works in which every important argument is based on one or more completely improbable assumptions. We have never before observed such a flaunting of theory. The fearlessness shown in their resolute defiance of fact leaves us breathless. Even Galileo's opponents would have been awed by their performance.

Whatever their model requires, that they assume, no matter what the evidence may be. A more Procrustean bed has never been devised. For example, since their marginal cost-marginal benefit model requires that a student counted in this category would not have otherwise attended Western, they say, "we assume that student athletes would not attend WKU were it not for the particular sport" (op. cit. "Summary"). No survey was done; no evidence is cited. The possibility that an athlete would have come to Western even if he or she had not received a grant-in-aid is not even entertained. What the theory demands is true; it is beyond the need for evidence. A person willing to make this assumption today will likely put a bid on Brooklyn Bridge tomorrow.

Sometimes the sheer arbitrariness of the assumption made is nothing short of stunning. The economists say that the marginal cost of "accepting a new student is close to zero" (ibid., p.4. Then they arbitrarily decide that in educating non-athletes the university incurs significant costs, but the cost of educating the athletes receiving grants-in-aid is practically nothing.

It is impossible to be more capricious. The most likely consequence of the economists' report is that others will join in the fun. Faculty will claim that their children had no intention of attending Western and so also incur only marginal costs. State legislators and university regents and administrators are likely to claim the same. Indeed, all loyal taxpayers, seeing an opportunity for tuition avoidance (not tuition evasion, be it understood) will claim the same for their sons and daughters. Indeed, when all claims have been considered, it will be discovered that some nasty orphans are the source of all of the university's costs.

We could go on, but we do not want to take from readers of the economists' report the pleasure of discovering similar fantastical assumptions for themselves.