How Big Ten changed Rutgers beyond athletics

The benefits of the university’s decision to join the Big Ten go far beyond sports — and yet skepticism in the school’s community remains

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Few at Rutgers understood the Big Ten’s non-athletic impact before the university agreed to join the conference in 2012. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green, File) AP

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Howard Hochster doesn’t follow college football closely. He knows enough, however, to understand that Rutgers has struggled to compete with the powerhouses in the conference it joined 10 years ago this month.

He just can’t relate. In his corner of the university, Rutgers is the powerhouse that other schools in the league envy. Hochster is associate director of clinical research for the Rutgers Cancer Institute, and all of New Jersey — all of humanity, actually — is rooting for his team.
"I like to say we may be the littlest of the Big Ten in football, but in cancer, we're right up there with the giants," Hochster said.

It is a very good line. And be honest: If you're a Rutgers graduate, would you rather have your alma mater be better than Ohio State on the football field or in a laboratory where researchers are trying to cure the most insidious disease facing mankind?

You don't have to answer that. Rutgers is not competing with Ohio State — or Michigan, or Northwestern, or any of their Big Ten counterparts — in cancer research. It is working with those institutions to do the clinical research necessary to fight the disease, and doing it with the help of the conference it joined with sports in mind.

The Big Ten Cancer Research Consortium has helped streamline the research at the 11 universities that are conducting clinical trials. If Hochster wants to test a new cancer treatment in a way that drug companies are not exploring, he used to spend valuable time seeking out colleagues at other hospitals to find enough patients to make a study feasible. Now, the consortium does that work for him.

"It takes away a big burden on me," Hochster said. "It allows us to do their academic trials with our Big Ten cancer-center colleagues, and these are excellent academic cancer centers. So we have a chance to do more trials more quickly."

Rutgers president Jonathan Holloway with the Scarlet Knight mascot at the 2022 football spring game, has defended the university's place in the Big Ten. Andrew Mills | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

The Big Ten, first and foremost, is an athletic conference. It is easy to be cynical about any academic component given the $8 billion media-rights deal and the eight-figure contracts regularly dished out to football coaches.

All the stuff about libraries and laboratories is usually contained to those
commercial at halftime on the Big Ten Network — you know, the ones you never watch while you’re heading to the kitchen to stock up on snacks.

But school officials are adamant that joining the Big Ten has made Rutgers a more formidable and esteemed university. The association with high-level research universities alone, like Northwestern, Purdue and the rest, they say, has added to the prestige.

“Things like that were never fully appreciated by the majority of people on the campus because they didn’t hear enough about it or stop to think about it,” said Robert Barchi, who was the university’s president when it joined the Big Ten. “It was an uphill push to make people understand the magnitude of what we were getting beyond athletics.”

That struggle continues today.

In some ways, it is understandable. Most of the outside focus on Rutgers joining the Big Ten centered on the costs associated with the move and the struggles most of its sports teams faced to compete initially, not on the ancillary benefits. Rutgers continues lose money on athletics — with no end in sight — and the high-profile football team has struggled mightily.

PART ONE: The untold story of how Rutgers crashed the Big Ten

If the Scarlet Knights lose badly, it is an ironclad guarantee that social media posts will pop up insisting that it “doesn’t belong in the Big Ten,” or that it should leave the conference. It is prevalent enough as a talking point within the university faculty that Barchi’s successor chose to address it at a Board of Trustees meeting in September.

In a room filled with many of the university’s most prominent alumni and financial supporters, Jonathan Holloway addressed leaving the Big Ten — a topic that would be unthinkable at any other university in the conference — and explained why it would be a bad idea beyond the playing fields.

“I’ve made it clear that leaving the Big Ten is not going to happen,” Holloway said. “It would be catastrophic reputationally and ... an embarrassment to do so, it’s important to remember that we are now part of an $11.4 billion research consortium. I believe it’s the biggest one in the country, and it’s expanding. The Big Ten is much more than just about athletics.”

So what, exactly, does that mean? NJ Advance Media spoke with more than a dozen people in and around Rutgers to pinpoint how joining the Big Ten in 2012 has impacted the university as a whole.

Some of the examples, like a rising number of out-of-state applications,
participation in the league's academic alliances and increased research opportunities, are tangible. Others, like how Rutgers is perceived by outsiders — and even to those who have been part of the university community for decades — are much more subjective.

“Nobody ever poo-pooed Rutgers, but there’s a certain cachet with being in the Big Ten,” said Tom Stephens, who for 20 years has served as the NCAA faculty representative for Rutgers athletics. “There’s a feeling that it’s real.”

ACADEMICS

Want to take a class on K-Pop’s impact on Korean culture that isn’t offered at Rutgers but is available at Ohio State? Granted, this isn’t exactly a common problem, but it was an issue for Rutgers student Helena Hazel — and the Big Ten Academic Alliance solved it.

Hazel was able to enroll in “K-Pop Genre, Identity, Industry, Fandom” at Ohio State and will take classes online next semester, the third class related to Korean culture that the Camden County native will have taken that is available at other Big Ten schools but not here in New Jersey.

“It’s fantastic that Rutgers and the other schools participating in the Big Ten Academic Alliance are working together to create a larger course selection for students,” Hazel said. “It gives students the opportunity to interact with and learn from brilliant professors that we otherwise may have never interacted with.”

In some ways, going into the Big Ten was more important for the academic side of Rutgers than the athletic side.

Richard Edwards, the chancellor emeritus for Rutgers

In her senior year, Sonia Singh was a teaching assistant in a class called “Traditional Korean poetry: Sijo” with students from Rutgers, Michigan and Purdue. “Some of my best writing and my most formative leadership development moments have occurred because of their BTAA classes,” said Singh, a Jersey City native now in graduate school at NYU.

The Big Ten Academic Alliance was created in 1988, according to its website, to foster “a robust interconnected infrastructure and trusted peer network to contribute to the common good” — which sounds like a description a bunch of university administrators would come up with.

The takeaway, in English: Most departments at Rutgers meet regularly with their Big Ten counterparts to discuss latest developments in their respective fields, and students in New Jersey can enroll in certain online classes at the other universities for no extra cost.
In addition, the libraries at the Big Ten universities are managed as a single collection — if a student at Northwestern has access to a book, then so does her counterpart at Rutgers, or Maryland, or anywhere in the league. Combined, that is more than 130 million volumes.

“In some ways,” said Richard Edwards, the chancellor emeritus for Rutgers, “going into the Big Ten was more important for the academic side of Rutgers than the athletic side.”

EXPOSURE

When Barchi was first learning about what Big Ten membership would mean for Rutgers, the university was searching for ways to broaden its appeal to out-of-state students. The conference offered an easy way: Regular minute-long spots that aired during broadcasts on the Big Ten Network.

That alone put the Rutgers brand in millions of homes across the country.

“We were able to produce a video that described the academics, scholarship and environment of Rutgers that ran in millions of homes,” Barchi said. “It ran every single week that we played. I couldn’t possibly have bought that for. I don’t know, you name the number — $20 million, $50 million?”

PART TWO: Ten years into the Big Ten, will Rutgers ever stop bleeding money?

The additional exposure isn’t just important in attracting new students. Edwards said it has an impact on all alumni. He gives the example of a company executive in Chicago who might be more familiar with Rutgers when he or she sees it on an application because it is in the Big Ten.

“That exposure gets the name out and that makes any Rutgers degree more valuable because more people are aware of the university.” Edwards said.

APPLICATIONS

Rutgers uses the Big Ten as a recruiting tool. It joins other conference members at domestic and international events designed to attract students, and when the football team hosted Penn State last week, applicants were invited to sit in the student section to get a taste of the game-day experience.
The current freshman class at Rutgers is 7,700 students, the biggest in school history, and university officials point to several reasons. Courtney McAnuff, the university’s vice chancellor for enrollment management, believes the Big Ten is on that list.

“There is just a huge power to athletics and something that gives us a lot of airtime without having to pay for it,” McAnuff said. “The brand of New Brunswick is emphasized around the country. We’ve seen a lot more interest in enrolling in New Brunswick, everyone wants to take credit for it, but I think, certainly, joining the Big Ten is very positive.”

The current freshman class is the biggest in Rutgers history at 7,700 students, and the average SAT score is also the highest ever, at 1341.

The numbers support that belief. In 2014, the first year that Rutgers competed in the Big Ten, the university received 31,941 applications for four-year students, according to the admissions office. Eight years later, that number has climbed to 41,676 — a 30.5 percent increase.

The rise is even more significant for out-of-state students, with 8,671 applications in 2014 and 8,826 in 2022. That’s a 56 percent increase, which is beneficial for the university’s bottom line because non-New Jersey residents pay a higher tuition.

More applications, McAnuff said, means a higher level of student. The average SAT score for the freshman class is the highest it’s ever been, at 1341, which is a full 70 points higher than it was in 2012, the year Rutgers accepted the Big Ten’s invitation.

“We are inextricably tied to the Big Ten’s success,” McAnuff said. “You know about Notre Dame, but you never heard about the academics — you just assumed it was great academics. Rutgers has some of the best students in the country. The public does equate great programs athletically with great schools, but more important than that, it’s the company of the Big Ten. They are all phenomenal institutions, and we are now a part of that.”

PERCEPTION
In the season before joining the Big Ten, Rutgers was in the American Athletic Conference with the University of Central Florida, Houston and Memphis, universities that placed 137th, 182nd and 263rd, respectively, in the latest U.S. News & World Report college rankings.

"No disrespect to those institutions, but they don't have the academic prominence of Rutgers University, and also, it was a footprint that didn't make any sense athletically," Rutgers athletic director Patrick Hobbs said.

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Tom Stephens, the NCAA faculty representative for Rutgers athletics

What is the old cliche about the company you keep? In the Big Ten, 15 of the 16 current and future members are in the top 20 percent of that influential list (only Nebraska, at 151, is not), while Rutgers came in at 53rd, its highest placement ever.

More importantly, Rutgers — a major research university — finally finds itself grouped with similar institutions. That matters.

"Many people didn't associate Rutgers with that class of schools," Barchi said, "even though we were one of the biggest of them all."

FUNDRAISING

The impact of the Big Ten on the bottom line at Rutgers is debatable with the university spending more than ever on athletics. But fundraising is also up at the university, from $933.2 million in the fiscal year 2012 to $214.5 million in 2022.

"It is very clear from the perspective of a donor and an alum that being in the Big Ten is a huge point of pride," said Kimberly Hopely, president of the Rutgers University Foundation.

Rutgers' endowment has tripled in size since the university joined the Big Ten, growing from $634.9 million to $1.98 billion. That still ranks just 12th in the conference, ahead of Nebraska ($1.1 billion) and Maryland ($997 million) and well behind leaders Michigan ($17.7 billion) and Northwestern ($16.1 billion).
Endowment assets are funds raised primarily from private and charitable donations through the university’s fundraising arm, and the money is used to fund scholarship aid, research initiatives, teaching programs and new technologies. Growing it is a huge priority at Rutgers.

Again the rise over the past decade can’t all be attributed to joining the Big Ten. Holloway, in a speech to the faculty senate in February, cited the larger endowments at other Big Ten universities as aspirational figures because, he said, “the endowment is nowhere close to where it needs to be.”

Even in this fundraising, Rutgers is chasing Michigan and Ohio State — and doing so could impact the university for generations.

“Fundraising is a trailing indicator of all the aspects of what a university is doing,” Hopely said. “If you're looking at a 10-year window, Rutgers being part of the Big Ten, joining the Big Ten and then also the integration of the medical school has really transformed Rutgers into the university it is today.”

RESEARCH

The Big Ten Cancer Research Consortium helps more than 3,000 researchers do “large scale research more effectively and efficiently,” which is no small role given that the Big Ten cancer centers enroll 30,000 patient volunteers for their clinical studies each year.

While Ohio State’s football team was traveling to Maryland last weekend, the university’s cancer center was hosting the annual Big Ten CRC Summit, a day-long event with some of the nation’s leading researchers giving presentations on topics like “population science and cancer prevention” and “clinical cancer research challenges.”

Howard Hochster, associate director of clinical research for the Rutgers Cancer Institute, uses the Big Ten Cancer Research Consortium to help facilitate important research.
Doctors from Rutgers were among them.

Hochster, who is also director of Oncology Research for RWJBarnabas Health, said Rutgers is leading 12 open cancer studies through the consortium. One he is actively working on involves a promising new treatment for liver cancer.

“The consortium is an opportunity to do multi-center investigative trials with some central infrastructure,” Hochster said. “It allows us to do some of the cancer research that companies don’t prioritize but could be very important for patients, and we do it with our peers so we can bring these discoveries to the forefront more quickly.”

That won’t get the attention that the Ohio State-Michigan game will in a few weeks, and it won’t help football coach Greg Schiano recruit the next great quarterback to New Jersey. But it’s one of the many ways the Big Ten has impacted Rutgers beyond the playing field over the past 10 years.

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