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Athletics on Campus: Refocusing on Academic Outcomes

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It is increasingly evident that changes are needed in the role that athletic programs play in institutions of higher education. The president/chief executive officer (CEO) of an educational institution must ensure that the mission and goals of athletic programs are in accord with the missions and goals of the institution itself, and that control of programs ultimately is in the hands of the leader of the institution. Only then can the duty to educate student-athletes as students first and athletes second be fulfilled.

The place of athletics within the university has long been a topic of debate. A review of the research on students and athletics indicates that the historical arguments for college athletic programs are not supported. It should be noted that most of the attention concerning this issue has been focused on National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Division I-A programs. NCAA membership divisions include in order of perceived prominence 1-A, 1-AA, 2, and 3; each division has different requirements for the number of men's and women's sports offered, the status of competitors, and the availability of financial aid (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2005). However, other levels of competition are beginning to receive similar attention and review as illustrated by Bowen and Levin's 2003 *Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values*.

Historically advocates for athletic programs on college campuses have defended their existence citing presumed positive outcomes in several areas. Such advocates claim that:

1. Athletics are educational for participants: they build character and teach important values;
2. Athletics provide a source of entertainment and serve a unifying function for increasingly fragmented university communities and those groups such as alumni who identify with the university;
3. Athletics generate direct revenue from programs and also indirect revenue derived from visibility and prestige associated with athletics, including the enrollment incentive factor.

These values are still used in support of athletic programs despite research that has empirically discounted the claim that athletics teach educational values and increase the academic performance of participants. According to many studies (Chu, 1989; Gerdy, 1997; Stoll & Beller, 2000), such values have been greatly overemphasized. Studies have also indicated that athletic programs are not of preeminent interest to alumni and do not correlate directly with alumni giving (Chu, 1989). The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics in its 2001 report presented statistics that point to only 15% of Division I and II programs operating in the black, and even this figure is suspect because capital expenditures, debt service, and many indirect program costs are not figured into the balance sheet. Taken alone, Division I data show that there has been a steady decrease since the early 1990s in the number of programs that claim to make a profit (Gerdy, 2000).

Further complicating the place of athletics on the college campus are the many problem areas associated with, or attributed to, athletics and the reform efforts deemed necessary by many in higher education. The Knight Commission in its 2001 report stated that athletics continue to “threaten to overwhelm the universities in whose name they were established” and that higher education needs to “draw together all of its strengths and assets to reassert the primacy of the educational mission of the academy” (Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001, p. 11).

A review of what are considered the five most influential reports on college athletics (1929 Carnegie Foundation Report; 1952 Presidents Report for the American Council on Education (ACE); Hanford’s 1974 Study for ACE; and the 1991 and 2001 Knight Commission reports) indicates that reform must come in three areas: (1) academic reform; (2) slowing down of the athletics ‘arms race’; and (3) a de-emphasis of the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics (Thelin, 1994; Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001). Specific issues within these three reform areas include low graduation rates, lowering of academic entrance requirements for athletes, uncontrolled spending for facilities, escalating compensation for coaches, the manipulation of schedules to accommodate television, and the big-business element that is driving athletic departments to acquire corporate sponsorships and other external funding.

It is evident that the outcomes of college athletics programs are far removed from the academic values often espoused. James Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan, along with others has characterized big-time athletic programs as the antithesis of academic values and also as “corrosive and corruptive to the academic enterprise” (Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001, p. 13). Where else in the university is the expenditure of significant resources defended on the basis of nonacademic performance criteria? The central issue then becomes one of control—what entities are in place and what steps must they take to realign college athletic programs with justifiable academic outcomes?

Controlling forces of intercollegiate athletics are both external and internal in nature. External control is directly delegated to national athletic associations such as the NCAA and to member athletic conferences. In a less direct sense some level of control might also be found in higher education associations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB).

Control through the NCAA and member conferences is vested in the philosophies and voting power of member institutions. The NCAA is not in the business of creating control but rather carrying out the will of the membership. Current NCAA President Myles Brand, former President of the University of Indiana, has given indication that academic reform will be of the highest legislative priority, and current initiatives support this claim. In his address to the 2005 NCAA Convention, Brand emphatically stressed the refocusing of athletics within the mission of the institution. Brand stated that “I have the bully pulpit and I have used it to urge action, change, reform and common sense” (“Brand challenges,” 2005). He added that

It means being committed in word and especially in deed to the goals and the reasons for which the university exists. It means the integration of college sports within the academic mission of the university, and it means keeping student-athletes at the center of what we do. (“Brand challenges,” 2005)

New legislation resulting from the January convention would indicate that the NCAA is indeed in reform mode. The issue of low graduation rates for student-athletes was addressed with the adoption of new academic reform standards for Division 1 programs. Programs will be measured by the Academic Performance Rate (APR), which is calculated each year. The APR takes into consideration the number of student-athletes on each team who remain academically eligible, remain full-time students, and graduate. Simply put, college sport teams that do not graduate at least 50% of their student-athletes could lose up to 10% of the maximum financial aid limit in the specific sport. For example, a Division 1-A football team with 85 scholarships could lose up to nine if not in compliance with the new standards. In addition to such contemporaneous penalties there will also be a historical penalty structure that results in a first-year warning, second-year restrictions on recruiting and/or financial aid, and third-year possible loss of post season eligibility. If still not in compliance by the fourth-year a team will lose its NCAA membership status (Christiansen, 2005).

Higher education associations likewise can recommend policy change in the athletic arena but historically have had little real power to mandate substantive change. The Knight Commission proposed the creation of a Coalition of Presidents that would bring together leaders from ACE, AGB, presidents from the most visible conferences, and trustees to provide impetus for change (Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001). Such groups are not yet realistic catalysts for change.

Therefore, to define the place of athletics on the college campus, it is essential to consider the elements of internal control. Internal control begins and ends at the desk of the university president/CEO. Other internal controls include the roles of the board of trustees, faculty, the faculty athletic representative, and the student-athletes themselves.

It has been universally noted that for a variety of reasons many presidents have been unable or unwilling to exert dynamic leadership over athletic programs. Barriers to leadership include bureaucratic layers/filters, trustees who evaluate "good management" in different terms, and the changing nature of the role of the president away from campus to external friend and fundraiser (Chu, 1989; Bailey & Littleton, 1991; Duderstadt, 2004).

Trustees often bring personal agendas and interests to the leadership dynamic, and athletics is a program of great interest to many. This presents an interesting problem, as the Knight Commission believes that trustees must insist that presidents regain control of athletic programs and further that trustees must support bold actions by their presidents (Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001). This may prove difficult when many trustees do not want initiatives that would seemingly take away from athletic programs as they envision them.

How then can colleges and universities best regain control of their athletic programs and ensure relevant academic outcomes for participants? The answer lies in the organizational placement of athletics within the administrative structure. Athletics should report directly to an administrator who has academic oversight authority (Chu, 1989). This academic administrator must have as a guide an institutional position paper created by and supported by the president and board that forcefully and specifically outlines program goals and objectives, clearly states procedures for review and evaluation of program policies, and states the commitment of the institution to the total welfare of the student-athlete (Bailey & Littleton, 1991). Presidents therefore exert leadership through a shared philosophy but assign day-to-day oversight within the academic administrative structure. For this to be successful, it is essential that boards understand their role when it comes to involvement in athletic matters. To this end, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges recently issued a document detailing principles and guidelines for trustee involvement in athletic matters (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2004).

There are also important roles in this structure for both faculty and student-athletes. Many who have

advocated athletic reform insist that faculty become more actively involved in the determination of policies for the conduct of athletics and speak out when academic values are jeopardized. Faculty involvement can include representation on the faculty senate and the athletic council, as well as service as academic advisors to student-athletes replacing athletic department academic advisors prevalent in many programs (Bailey & Littleton, 1991; Duderstadt, 2003). The faculty athletic representative must be thoughtfully appointed to insure the faculty member is willing to provide critical oversight, and not simply be a faculty member who simply has an interest in athletics. Examples of increasing faculty involvement in academic issues relating to athletics include the Drake Group, an initiative to bring concerned faculty together, and the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, an independent faculty organization endorsed by the faculty senates of 36 Division IA schools (Steinbach, 2004b).

Similarly, the student-athlete must be given a real voice in matters of athletic policy related to academic outcomes. It should be noted that through NCAA sponsorship and resources the Student Athlete Advisory Committee has emerged on many campuses as a powerful representative for the student-athlete.

This suggested model is not original, as many institutions have operated under similar systems. The question of whether or not it is naïve to expect Division I institutions to follow such a model and initiate recommendations of the Knight Commission and other reports is open to debate. Vanderbilt Chancellor Gordon Gee has taken the first bold step in restructuring athletics. While not following the suggested model exactly, Vanderbilt, in an effort to better integrate athletics into the educational mission, has merged athletics with campus recreation and wellness. The Athletic Department has been changed to Athletic Program. There is no longer a position of athletics director; functions traditionally handled by athletics (media relations, marketing, public affairs, broadcasting, and fundraising) are now being handled by university-wide departments. Included in this broad-based reorganization are also programs for greater faculty and student-athlete involvement. Future plans include turning coaches into part-time faculty members (Steinbach, 2004a).

That athletic programs on many college campuses have failed to adhere to academic outcomes is evident. The need for change and to regain control is a clear mandate. It is not the abolishment of athletics that is called for, but rather a renewed emphasis on the educational role of athletic programs in serving the student-athlete. Whatever

the model, for athletics to regain its place in the academic mission of the institution requires that presidents, boards, faculty, and coaches be held accountable for such outcomes. It is accepted that athletic programs have the potential for educational value, but programs must operate within the mission of the institution. A. Bartlett Giamatti, former

president of Yale University, in testimony to the first Knight Commission stated that those accountable for athletics could no longer afford “failures of nerve, principle, and purpose” (Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2001, p. 13), and this statement holds even more truth today.

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Biography

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