



March 28, 2014

Wednesday's decision by the NLRB in the Northwestern football case, judging the plaintiffs to be employees, appears to be a clear signal that however the current case plays out, the collegiate model cannot be sustained without dramatic and publicly persuasive change in college sports.

When we were granted a voice at the D1 Board meeting last October, COIA's message was that such change would be necessary to defend the collegiate model, beginning with a reconfiguration of the NCAA's mission to prioritize the regulation of intercollegiate athletics in the interest of the national academic enterprise of higher education. Such a reconfigured mission would: 1) introduce a foundational rationale for maintaining the collegiate model and the primacy of academics, 2) reposition the NCAA as an agent of the public interest, and 3) provide a framework for reasonably constraining the institutional (as opposed to team) pursuit of winning in a zero-sum context.

The initial NLRB ruling, whether sustained or not, clarifies that two features of college sports make the collegiate model particularly vulnerable. Neither the training demands associated with near-professional performance standards, nor the economic imperatives and risks to the sustainability of our universities from an overreliance on television revenues, associated with the present scale of commercialization are consistent with the collegiate model. Whether by means of seeking an anti-trust exemption or through some equally effective alternative discipline, we believe the NCAA must act quickly to assure our athletes and the public that it is designing a regulatory framework that will unambiguously demonstrate that the primary relationship between NCAA member schools and athletes is an academic one.

We are deeply concerned that despite some positive features, the current restructuring efforts will provide no such bases of change or public reassurance. We believe instead that, whatever the motives or merits, the focus on big-conference semi-autonomy will be interpreted primarily as a further commitment to commercial expansion, and that the message sent by isolated changes, such as the restructuring of the D1 Board (which we generally support and appreciate), will be drowned out by the failure to address the greater forces threatening the collegiate model.

We believe that the challenges facing the collegiate model must be addressed now, by decisive and principled NCAA leadership. COIA was formed in 2002 as an organization of faculty committed to support strong presidential leadership for reform. That and defending both the academic integrity of our institutions and the collegiate model remain the heart of our own mission. We recognize the enormous difficulties of meeting the current challenges, and we are prepared to do our best to mobilize active faculty support for the changes that must be made to protect the student-athlete concept and intercollegiate athletics.

Yours respectfully,
Mike Bowen

Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics

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