

2007 NCAA CONVENTION

Integrating Athletics into Academics panel 06 Jan 07

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PUTTING THE STUDENT BACK INTO THE STUDENT-ATHLETE

I want to start with the following news article published last September:

SARASOTA, FL—Bowling to pressure from alumni, boosters and students, Florida State University athletic director Dave Hart Jr. announced yesterday that FSU would phase out all academic operations by 2010 in order to make athletics the school's No. 1 priority. "It's clear that Florida State's mission is to provide the young men and women enrolled here with a world-class football program. Eliminating academics will allow us to focus on being No. 1 every year," Hart said. "While academics may bring a certain amount of prestige to an athletic program, national polls clearly show that our non-athletic operations have become a major distraction." FSU's restructuring will begin by eliminating the College of Arts and Sciences on January 1st.

This article, from the satirical publication "The Onion", is, of course, completely fabricated. Yet how many of you paused for a second before deciding this was not true? Why did you hesitate? Because big time college sports is compromising the academic values of our higher education institutions.

We're surrounded by disturbing sports news: Lacrosse teammates hire strippers, football players helmet-bash each other during a game, and athletes are charged with a myriad of felonies and misdemeanors. The problems are not limited to student-athletes: we've seen highly paid coaches pad their resumes, deep-pocketed boosters provide non-existent jobs to athletes, faculty run fake courses, and administrators admit unqualified student-athletes from non-accredited high schools.

On my campus, the University of Oregon, we fly 17 yr old recruits into Eugene on private jets, have 33 different football uniform combinations, and spend millions on an extravagant locker room stocked with video games and big screen TVs. Oregon spent more on renovating its stadium a few years back for 6 days of football a year than the annual US effort to prevent AIDs in sub-Saharan Africa. We just announced a plan to build a state of the art \$4M academic learning center only for student-athletes that will be larger and better equipped and staffed than the same facility for our other 20,000 students. And on a campus that is always begging for academic monies, we somehow found \$2M to buy out the contract of the athletic director. As my Jewish mother says, "I should be so lucky". Similar stories abound on other campuses.

It is clear that intercollegiate athletics is in serious difficulty. Big time college sports has lost its moral compass.

Intercollegiate athletics traces its origin to the Greco-Roman ideal of building sound minds and sound bodies. In the US this tradition has evolved inside the framework of higher education, with the modern concept of the "student-athlete". In recent years, however, higher education's commitment to the "student" part of the student-athlete compact has disappeared under an avalanche of other priorities, including satisfying unreasonable demands of boosters and alumni,

promoting a “winning is the only thing” mentality, and encouraging a facilities arms race. The result is decreased attention to the student-athlete’s intellectual development, poor student-athlete classroom performance, and low graduation rates, particularly among Division IA football and men’s basketball players. Higher education has broken its promise to the student-athlete. In this most important of contests, the “student” is losing out to the “athlete.”

To its credit, the NCAA has taken the lead in re-integrating intercollegiate athletics into higher education and insisting that the educational experience of the student athlete is paramount. In the past several years the NCAA has instituted several important measures to improve student-athlete academic performance such as tightening academic admissions requirements for scholarship athletes, coupling athletic eligibility to academic progress, and penalizing athletic teams with low graduation rates. These are significant advances, yet intercollegiate athletics continues to drift far beyond its original educational purpose.

There is a serious need for reform, and we need immediate action on five key issues: academic integrity; student-athlete welfare; athletic governance at the school and conference levels; fiscal responsibility and transparency; and over-commercialization.

The NCAA has begun to address these issues through the recently released Presidential Task Force report on the future of Division IA athletics. The report proposed numerous remedies, including stronger leadership by college presidents, adherence of all athletic activities to institutional academic values and principles, insistence on fiscal transparency, and inclusion of faculty in athletic governance. The report’s weakness is that all its proposals are recommendations rather than enforceable policies. It is highly unlikely that any individual institution will voluntarily walk down the reform path alone. The NCAA must not rest on its successes - it must continue to be at the forefront of athletic reform and turn the Presidential Task Force proposals into NCAA by-laws.

Meaningful reform will only occur when the NCAA works together with college presidents and other stakeholder groups to institute mandatory nationwide changes. One stakeholder group the presidents and the NCAA must look to for support and guidance is the faculty, the institutional stewards of academic integrity.

Several national faculty groups, including our group, the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics as well as the Faculty Athletic Representative Association, and the Division IA Faculty Athletic Representatives are fully committed to athletic reform. Other national groups such as the respected Knight Commission and the College Sports Project are also eager to help. Athletic reform will not succeed until the NCAA and college officials partner with faculty.

The bottom line is this: The fundamental rationale for intercollegiate athletics is that important life skills can be learned by meshing academic excellence with the discipline and values of sports. This goal cannot be realized if we abandon the principle that academic achievement is essential to the personal development of student-athletes. Experience suggests, however, that many sports programs don’t take academic goals seriously, and let athletic commitments overshadow academic work. Left unchecked, prime time college sports will continue to undermine academic integrity,

which is the moral compass of higher education in the classroom and on the playing field. It is time to put the student back into the student-athlete.