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# The Divide Between N.C.A.A. Athletics and Education: What Do We Do?

James N. Loughran, S. J.

*Recent research suggests that there is no way to reform NCAA athletics in colleges and universities. The Drake Group plan proposes one way to restore academic integrity in college sports.*

What we don't need is another article on the evils of N.C.A.A.-run college sports. That essay (or book, opinion piece, prestigious report) has already been persuasively written dozens of times.<sup>1</sup> Two recent examples that have received much attention, and not only by the sports media, are: *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values* by James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and "A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education," a Report of the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics ([www.knightfdn.org](http://www.knightfdn.org)). Both publications, as their sub-titles suggest, point the finger at the ever widening divide -- "its pervasiveness and subtlety" -- between core academic values and the ethos and requirements of N.C.A.A.-run college athletics. Describing "today's disgraceful environment," the Knight Commission highlights "academic transgressions, a financial arms race, and commercialization." Shulman and Bowen give evidence that the excesses of big-time college sports are spreading to women's sports, to the so-called minor sports, to the lower divisions of the N.C.A.A., including the elite liberal arts colleges, and even to high schools. Back in 1989, eight out of ten Americans questioned in a Louis Harris poll "agreed that intercollegiate sports had spun out of control." Twelve years later, especially on college campuses, that number must be at least as high, along with the growing realization that the situation is only getting worse.

The topic that needs discussion is: aware of the corruption, hypocrisy, and anti-academic values of N.C.A.A.-run college athletics, what do we do? In the

world of Jesuit higher education, what do we do -- trustee, president, academic officer, faculty member, student personnel administrator, anyone who cares about a Jesuit college's integrity and fidelity to mission? Let us begin by shedding several illusions.

## Four Illusions

The evils of N.C.A.A.-run sports regularly prompt cries like the following, often from good, smart people.

1. *It's up to the college presidents. They're the ones who should do something about this.* If there is one thing that the history of college sports demonstrates, it is that college presidents are unable to accomplish anything in this arena and, in fact, only make things worse. Why such presidential impotence and ineptitude? One reason is offered by the Knight Commission: given the intercollegiate and national span of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, "No single college or university can afford to act unilaterally, nor can any one conference act alone." Such a college(s) would risk fading from sight. Angry students, alumni, and boosters would go berserk. No president(s), even if successful in torching N.C.A.A. excesses, could stand the heat. Another reason for presidential failure is the assumption made by college presidents, working as a body within the N.C.A.A., that what is needed is Reform (with a capital >R=). Which brings us to the next illusion.

2. *What is desperately needed is "thoroughgoing Reform."* Again, if there is one thing that the history of college sports demonstrates, it is that Reform is impossible, that efforts at Reform only worsen things.

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Astonishingly, not even the Knight Commission nor Shulman/Bowen can face facts and put aside the illusion that N.C.A.A.-run sports "can be reintegrated into the moral and institutional culture of the university," although one does sense underlying hesitation and doubt. That Reform has failed, over and over again, is a fact. What is the explanation behind the fact? It is that N.C.A.A.-run sports are trying to do simultaneously two contradictory things: run a huge entertainment business, each year grossing hundreds of millions of dollars, and be an authentic contributor to the academic experience of students who remain amateurs. Thus "the N.C.A.A. scrambles to suppress the cheating, the neglect of academic values, and the exploitation of college athletes that its own promotion of big-time winning encourages." <sup>2</sup>

3. *Whatever others choose to do or tolerate, we shall run a clean program, one in which academics come first.* The image that comes to mind is the football team, outfitted in brand new jerseys and pants, trotting out to a muddy field determined to return to the locker

room with uniforms just as spotless as when they left. It can't be done, and, to the extent one tries, the less likely one will be a winning team.

The N.C.A.A. forces its Division One members to spend more money on athletics than they want by requiring sponsorship of a multitude of sports, by requiring that many hundreds of thousands of dollars be awarded in athletic scholarships (talk about irony!), and, most of all, by creating an environment in which winning depends on spending -- to get the best coaches, to add assistant coaches, to recruit, to have the best facilities, to market in order to draw crowds, etc. (thus "the arms race"). All of this money could be allocated, for example, to strengthening academic programs, to financial aid for needy, deserving students, to Campus Ministry, or even to intramurals and recreation. Meanwhile, the more ambitious, the bigger, and the more "successful" the "program," the stronger the standard temptations: cheating, performance-enhancing drugs, illegal financial payments and, on the academic side, admissions irregularities, plagiarism, just enough attention to studies to remain N.C.A.A.-eligible. If "clean program" means scrupulous observance of N.C.A.A. rules, this hardly guarantees academic integrity; probably the contrary, if championships are the objective. If "clean program" means one in line with a college's mission and priorities, its teams will no doubt be left in the dust by its more committed rivals, committed, that is, more to athletic success than to academic values.

4. *There may be problems with N.C.A.A.-run college sports, but the good outweighs the bad: money-maker, donations, alumni loyalty and support, increased socioeconomic and racial diversity in the student body, and, for the athletes, character building and leadership training.* One of Shulman/Bowen's objectives was to examine these "myths" in light of facts. Here is some of what they report.

§ Money-maker: *"Whatever the other benefits of athletic programs are, or are perceived to be, the pursuit of net revenues is very difficult to accept as a justification. As a money-making venture, athletics is a bad business"* (p.257, emphasis in the original).

- \$ Donations: "The data flatly contradict one of the strongest myths about college athletics -- namely, that winning teams, and especially winning football teams, have a large, positive impact on giving rates" (p.266).
- \$ Alumni Loyalty: "One of the major lessons to be learned . . . is that the graduates of these schools are far more interested in other aspects of college life (including especially the quality of undergraduate teaching) than in intercollegiate athletics. Alumni/ae of these schools -- including notably the "big givers" -- are, if anything, more in favor of reducing the emphasis on intercollegiate competition than increasing it" (p.291).
- \$ Diversity: "Contrary to much popular mythology, recruitment of athletes has no marked effect on either the socioeconomic composition of these schools or on their racial diversity" (p.261).
- \$ Character/leadership: "...we know of no direct way of testing the proposition that playing sports in college is an especially effective way of developing this much prized but elusive attribute [character]" (p.183). "Athletes were more likely...to say...that leadership had played an important role in their lives; yet, surprisingly, neither this greater inclination to provide leadership, nor their stronger expression of its importance, is associated with evidence of having actually provided more leadership" (p.265).

Another "myth" Shulman/Bowen identify and examine is that "gender equity is giving women new opportunities" (p.xxvi). On one level, they admit, "this statement is unquestionably true," but, by imitating the male model, women's sports have contributed to the academics/athletics gap, nor have women benefited educationally and personally from intercollegiate sports any more than men have.

Although Shulman/Bowen demonstrate that athletics in general and favoring athletes in the

admissions process badly affect a college's academic quality and environment, they have little to say about the significance of an N.C.A.A. sports program for attracting high school seniors not being recruited as athletes. Art and Science Group, a research company in Baltimore, recently reported that "the enrollment decisions of only a handful of college-bound students - - roughly 10 to 15% -- are affected by intercollegiate athletics."<sup>3</sup> Among other co-curricular opportunities, such as community service and internships, that have greater influence than N.C.A.A. sports on choice of college are intramural and recreational sports.

### Commercialization or ?

Back to our question: Deeply aware of the incompatibility of N.C.A.A.-run college sports with the academic values of a good college, especially a good Jesuit college, what do we do? Presidential leadership is not likely. Reform is impossible. A college on its own is powerless to resolve the tensions between the demands of N.C.A.A. intercollegiate entertainment and those of education. The benefits claimed for



Photo Courtesy of Canisius College

college sports largely evaporate under close scrutiny. What do we do?

The Knight Commission Report appeared on June 26, 2001 (was it a coincidence that the N.B.A. draft, in which four of the top eight picks had just finished high school, dominated the sports pages at the same time?). The prestigious back-page "Point of View" feature of the July 13 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* had the title, "The Only Way to Reform College Sports is to Embrace Commercialization." Its author, Robert Atwell, a former college president and former President of the American Council on Education, argued for professionalization as a solution even though the Knight Report had declared this direction academically and morally "unacceptable." The gist of Atwell's proposal is that big-time college sports be run as an entertainment business and that players be hired as employees who would not necessarily be students. He finishes this way: "[My suggested approach] is more honest than the present hypocrisy. At the very least, something along those lines needs to be put on the table, rather than limiting the discussion to the same tired catalog of past failures and broken promises." Doesn't his proposal make sense for institutions, especially public ones, with huge financial and other commitments to big-time athletics as well as all sorts of life-threatening entanglements with off-campus forces, political and other, who want to root for teams, winning teams? What other route to academic integrity is available to the Oklahomas and Alabamas of the world?

It may be that for two or three of our twenty-eight Jesuit colleges professionalization is the only possible path to take. But what about the rest of us?

Before moving on, let us again face facts, be wary of illusion. Do we really care? Here is what Gary Engstrand, staff to a University of Minnesota Faculty Senate committee, stated several years before that university's horrific scandal in its athletic department:

Faculty DON'T CARE.

I will aver, and doubt anyone can successfully contradict me, that faculty members by and large do not give a damn about athletics. Period. And what the faculty don't care about

(as with any group of human beings), they are not going to spend time on fixing, even if it is broken. There is a small subset of faculty who are interested, but that is a VERY SMALL group (and, in my experience here and from what I know elsewhere, it is typically an unrepresentative group). The senior and most distinguished faculty, in and out of governance, do not care.

I don't think the faculty, or the public at large, wants to see any great changes in athletics. I have a lot of friends who are avid college basketball and football fans, and who aren't particularly interested in knowing about the abuses -- they just don't care about them. We have to recall that we have met the enemy and he is us -- it's all of us.<sup>4</sup>

If it is true that faculty don't care, no surprise that others on campus don't either.

But Wait a Minute! On all of our campuses many faculty care, care thoughtfully and passionately, about core academic and institutional values. For example: the blending of faculty teaching, research, and service towards an environment for learning; Jesuit liberal arts education and the promotion of justice; the consistency of mission, strategic plan, and budget decisions, including compensation. Here for your consideration are some faculty meeting scenarios meant to capture those passions. A fantasy follows.

Scenario One. At a Jesuit college on the east coast, Alexander Astin, the U.C.L.A. guru on college education effectiveness, shares his research on "What Matters in College?" The best colleges, he says, have a substantial number of faculty who "have achieved a kind of *balance* between research and teaching." They study and write, but they also give themselves to practices like freshman seminars, team teaching, interdisciplinary courses, essay exams, narrative evaluations; they interact more with undergraduates, involve them in their research, and stress writing; they also endorse a curriculum with emphasis on the humanities, especially history and language. Sandy Astin goes on: money helps of course, but none of what these faculty do "is *necessarily* precluded by limited

resources. ...The major limiting factors, it would seem, are institutional will, policy, and tradition." <sup>5</sup>

Astin gets a good response. Discussion ensues. The first speaker stands and says...

Scenario Two. At a conference on "Justice in Catholic Higher Education," held at a Jesuit college on the west coast, Margaret Steinfelds, editor of *Commonweal* magazine, discusses "markers of Catholic identity," including whether the promotion of justice is one of them. The following paragraph from her talk gets the most attention.

I take it that the primary marker has to be education itself: imparting information, introducing neophytes to facts, to data, to ideas, to expressing those ideas in speech and writing as well; introducing them, the students, into a discipline and its traditions, training people in certain skills; cogitating, mulling, actually thinking, thinking critically, arguing; we talked about debating, hypothesizing, and synthesizing; writing, rewriting, reconsidering, editing, and rewriting again. This is what any college or university is primarily about; what everybody should be doing and what, in fact, justice in the first instance requires that you do.<sup>6</sup>

For Peggy, this is a justice issue. Discussion ensues. The first speaker stands and says....

Scenario Three. At a Jesuit college in the mid-west, the president leads a discussion on the recently published strategic planning document. He begins this way: "As you know, we have been working on this for almost two years. It reflects input received from throughout the college community. I am very pleased with the results. I think you will agree that the Goals and Objectives of the Plan flow from the College's Identity and Mission Statement. I hope you agree with the Committee's identification of funding priorities. But, after funding some unavoidable increased costs and well-deserved salary raises, we need to recognize that resources are limited. Our endowment is growing; we are optimistic about enrollment prospects; we can raise tuition somewhat; we are planning another capital campaign. But we don't have nearly enough money to

fund all we want, even need, to do. I welcome your comments and suggestions."

The first speaker stands and says...

What might happen next in all three scenarios? Let us use the imagination.

Fantasy. A *bene merenti* faculty member, respected and admired as a teacher, scholar, overall good person and generous colleague, stands and says:

We should welcome this invitation to re-focus on what is important, to recommit ourselves to the values and goals of Jesuit liberal arts education, and to make sure that our stewardship of the funds that are entrusted to us by our students and their families, alumni and benefactors, the State, and others is scrupulously faithful to our mission.

One area obviously in tension with our core educational values is our involvement in N.C.A.A.-run athletics. Not sports and recreation, mind you; I'm talking about N.C.A.A. athletics. First of all, financially. The audit of the Athletics budget is a public document. How can those expenditures for recruiting, travel, personnel, etc. be justified when academic and other key departments are so in need? How can we reward athletic ability with financial aid when so many qualified applicants need help to pay tuition? Hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not a few million, are at stake.

Most of you have read about the new book, *The Game of Life* by Shulman and Bowen. What they say about an anti-academic athletic sub-culture building up in even the best colleges in the nation corresponds to my experience. The Athletic Department manages to keep its players eligible, but these students are missing out on the real values of the college experience, of liberal arts education. In their own minds, they are athletes first, students second. The system makes them think that way.

I'm concerned about other things: classes missed, assignments plagiarized, too many instances of misbehavior involving varsity athletes, poor sportsmanship, questionable admissions decisions, etc. It's getting worse. More and more the varsity teams are taking over the recreation center and squeezing ordinary students off the courts and out of the weight rooms and fitness facilities. Twenty years ago everyone on campus went to the games and rooted for the teams. Now fewer and fewer people go. The games are scheduled without thought of the academic calendar. They are no longer fun.

It is said that no one college on its own can straighten out athletics. Why is that? Especially at this college. What happened to Jesuit focus, adaptability, nerve? The *magis*?

The faculty member sits down. Readers can continue the fantasy on their own. Does she receive silence, applause, argument? What happens next? What should happen next?

### The Drake Group

Let us return from fantasy land to the real world. Who knows when or where voices of good sense, courage, and political savvy will be raised and heard? It is a sweet, inspiring thought that it could happen in a Jesuit college. In the meantime, let us address another question. Aware of the disconnect between N.C.A.A.-run athletics and academic values and scandalized by the corruption, hypocrisy, and financial extravagance in the world of college sports, what can any one person do in protest, to try to remedy things? Aware of the distortions of N.C.A.A.-run sports, what can one do who has experienced the value of sports, play, and competition and sees these values not only as part of "the education of the whole person," but also as part of the well-educated person's life?

The suggestion here is: Become a member of The Drake Group. (Dues are \$10 a year.)

In October of 1999, Jon Ericson, a professor of rhetoric and communication studies and former Provost of Drake University, organized a conference at Drake called "Corruption in College Sports: the Way Out." At the conference, The Drake Group came into existence, an organization consisting largely of college professors dedicated to "Working to Restore and Defend Academic Integrity in College Sports." Here is "The Plan" of The Drake Group which, the members hope, will eventually be adopted by Faculty Senates across the country.

### The Plan

College athletics has been transformed into a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry that has compromised the academic mission of the university. To restore academic integrity, to fulfill our obligation as faculty, and to protect the welfare of all students, the Drake Group proposes that:

1. Universities provide accountability of trustees, presidents, administrators and faculty by:

Public disclosure of the academic major, academic adviser, courses listed by academic major, general education requirements, and electives, including course grade point average and instructor for all students. No student's grades will be disclosed.

Or:

For each intercollegiate athletic team, public disclosure of the courses enrolled in by team members, the average of the grades given in the course, and instructor of the course, at the end of the semester.

2. Location and control of academic counseling and support services be transferred from athletics departments to academic counseling and support available for all students.

We also propose two changes that will require gradual implementation:

3. Athletic contests be scheduled so as not to conflict

with class attendance.

4. One-year renewable athletic scholarships be replaced with need-based financial aid, and that the term "student-athlete" be retired.

For more information about The Drake Group, including a rationale for the above plan, visit its Website: [www.thedrakegroup.org](http://www.thedrakegroup.org). The Drake Group, led by the remarkable Ericson, believes that faculty and others who care about academic values are in a state of denial regarding the anti-academic thrust of N.C.A.A.-run sports, and thus that "disclosure" of what is actually being allowed to happen academically in the lives of athletes is the way to shock people into facing the truth. In his testimony before the Knight Commission, Ericson insisted that "disclosure is not about student behavior, it is about institutional behavior." Whether or not you agree with The Drake Group, the Website is a source of information, debate, and bibliographical references regarding N.C.A.A.-run sports as well as an easy way to keep up on the latest scandals and excesses.

## Conclusion

The Knight Report concludes with "A Final Word":

...If it proves impossible to create a system of intercollegiate athletics that can live honorably within the American college and university, then responsible citizens must join with academic and public leaders to insist that the nation's colleges and universities get out of the business of big-time sports.

...The search now is for the will...to return intercollegiate athletics to the mainstream of American higher education.

Let it be said here that, over and over again, it has already been proven impossible to reintegrate N.C.A.A.-run sports with American higher education at its best. What reason is there to think otherwise? The toothpaste is out of the tube and cannot be put back. Colleges should either embrace commercialization, as Atwood and others suggest, or, right now, "get out of

the business of big-time sports." Why stall another five or seven years until the next Knight Commission pronouncement? If history is our teacher, we only prolong the agony as things deteriorate not just in the athletics arena but throughout our colleges.

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ENDNOTES

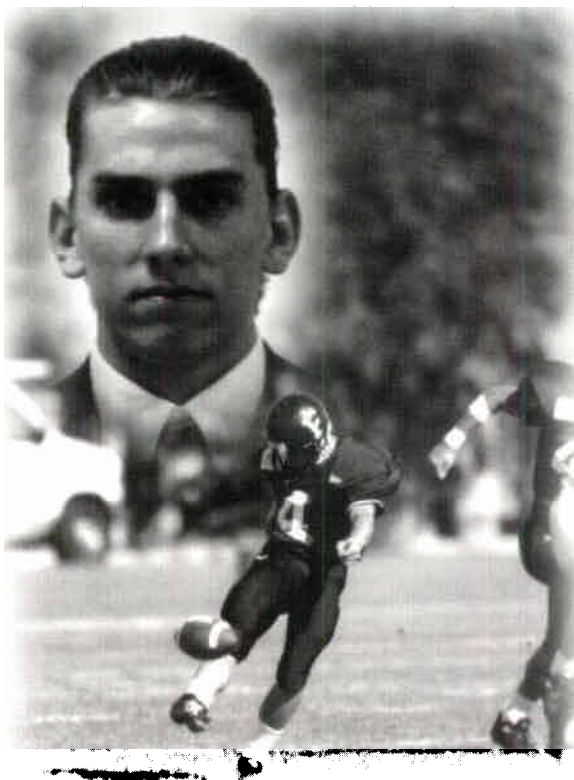


Photo Courtesy of Fordham Office of Public Affairs

Senior Brian Colsant, a place-kicker for the Fordham Rams football team, is a biological science major aspiring to start medical school in 2002. With a 3.3 G.P.A., Colsant was named to the 2000-2001 Dean's List and to the Patriot League's Commissioner's Honor Roll in 1998 and 2000. In addition to his academic achievements, Colsant's accomplishments on the ball field have also won him praise. He set two Fordham records in 2000, kicking a record 15 field goals last year to bring his career total to 30, another record.

Colsant, a Vacaville, California native, led the Patriot League in fieldgoals per game in 1999 and 2000, and ranked tenth in the NCAA Division I-AA in field goals per game in 2000. He was named pre-season All-American by *Football Gazette* this year.

<sup>1</sup>Murray Sperber, *College Sports, Inc.: The Athletic Department vs. the University* (New York: Henry Holt, 1990); Walter Byers, *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Murray Sperber, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000). For years, sportswriters at *The New York Times* -- such as Ira Berkow, George Vecsey, William Rhoden, and, especially, Robert Lipsyte -- have regularly written on the hypocrisy and corruption of big-time college sports. Recently, William Honan, who writes on education, has treated this topic off *The New York Times* sports pages. See Sperber's bibliographical notes in the back of *Beer and Circus* (pp.278-308) for many more references.

<sup>2</sup> Edward G. Lawry, "Conflicting Interests Make Reform of College Sports Impossible," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 1, 1991):A44.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Hesel, *Student POLL*, published by Art & Science Group, sponsored by Embark, Vol. 4:1.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Jon Ericson in his remarks before the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics at the Willard Hotel, Washington, D. C., on October 18, 2000 (originally an E-mail from Engstrand to Ericson).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander W. Astin, *What Matters in College?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc, 1997), XII-XIII. See also Alexander W. Astin and Mitchell J. Change, "Colleges that Emphasize Research and Teaching: Can You Have Your Cake and Eat it Too?," *Change*, September / October 1995,27,5:45-49.

<sup>6</sup> Mary K. McCullough, Ed., *The Just One Justices: The Role of Justice at the Heart of Catholic Higher Education* (Scranton: the University of Scranton Press, 2000): 140-141.