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## Is Sports in Your Mission Statement?



Jon Krause for The Chronicle

By Charles T. Clotfelter

As we enter the thick of college football season, with its abundance of televised games, I am reminded every Saturday of an important but seldom acknowledged fact about several hundred prominent American universities: They are members in good standing of the commercial entertainment industry. But the academic world's unwillingness to admit that rather obvious fact stands in the way of what should be an honest recognition—perhaps even appreciation—of some of the surprising benefits of big-time, commercialized college sports.

The evidence of this commercialization begins with ubiquitous TV coverage. This season's second week featured 23 nationally televised games on Saturday, plus three on Thursday and another on Friday, not counting the dozens of games covered regionally and those on the Big Ten's own cable network. It also shows up in mushrooming athletic budgets, lucrative contracts with shoe and apparel companies, hefty sales of logo-embossed gear, and, of course, outsized pay packages for celebrity coaches. The head football coaches at several dozen public universities earned an average of \$2-million last year, more than 14 times the average pay for full professors and several multiples of what their presidents made.

For reasons that are peculiarly American, universities here have developed commercial-sports enterprises that have no counterpart anywhere else in the world. With clear-eyed rationality, they nourish their sports enterprises year after year because, contrary to their official pronouncements, intercollegiate athletic competition is actually one of their core functions. Entrusting the operation of such enterprises to administrators entirely distinct from those who run the academic operations, these universities seek commercial opportunities because they must have income to buy what is necessary to keep their teams competitive.

This need for revenue has existed for a century. What is new today, thanks to cable television and three decades of growing incomes among the affluent, is the breathtaking amount of money to be earned from big-time college sports. The number of televised college football games on a typical fall weekend rose from just two in 1983 to 29 last year. And the NCAA's take from TV for its annual men's basketball tournament last year, \$571-million, was 15 times, in inflation-adjusted dollars, what it made in 1983.

Is it an overstatement to claim that athletics is a core function of these universities? My fellow faculty members would no doubt shrink from that view, for few of us relish the thought that we work in the entertainment business. Most of us would prefer to believe the words of our universities' official mission statements, which are more likely to mention our law schools, our schools of social work, our agricultural extension services, or a host of other administrative units, than they are to mention intercollegiate athletics.

Nor do most scholars of higher education acknowledge the actual importance of big-time college sports. Entire books covering a wide variety of topics related to American higher education have been published in recent years without a single mention of commercial sports. The same goes for journals devoted to higher education. Although there are some books devoted just to college sports, most of those who speak for or study American universities write as if big-time sports either do not exist or are just too inconsequential to mention.

When practiced by university administrators, this unwillingness to acknowledge the outsized importance of college sports might be dismissed as nothing more than the spin one expects to find in any advertising. But for us faculty members, our blindness to the significance of big-time sports amounts to operating in a parallel universe. The evidence is all around us, so commonplace that sometimes only visitors from abroad can see it. Football games close down entire campuses. Sports schedules routinely dictate when university meetings can and cannot be held. Wholly separate admissions criteria are applied to recruits in the revenue sports. The University of Alabama even delayed the start of its spring semester in January because of a bowl game in California.

For universities with big-time sports enterprises, sports dominate their media coverage, even by the country's self-styled newspaper of record. In 2007, more than six out of every seven articles in *The New York Times* about universities in one of the nation's top college football conferences were sports stories. Google the names of your university's president and the head football coach, and you will see who gets more coverage.

For many Americans, sports represent by far a university's most significant activity. Marketing surveys show that a sizable share of Americans either attend college football games or watch them on TV. Even practice games attract fans. Last year's spring scrimmage at Alabama drew an astounding 91,000 spectators. People care, and care deeply. In a recent survey taken in Lexington, Ky., a third of those responding agreed with the statement, "I live and die with the Wildcats. I'm happy if they win and sad if they lose."

Not only does this devotion provide college sports with commercial value, but it also represents an authentic but unheralded social benefit: the sheer enjoyment and pride that citizen-fans feel. Economists call it consumer surplus. The everyday term is "happiness."

Another social benefit of big-time college sports is its potential to teach by example civic values like meritocracy and productive interracial cooperation. One of the forces that opposed many Southerners' fierce embrace of segregation was another cherished tradition: college football. Coaches who treated their players equally and interracial teams that worked together provided much-needed models for the region and the country. This teaching by example continues today, as racially diverse college teams play together with harmony enough for high fives and fist bumps.

And let's not forget the potential for real benefit to the academic enterprise. Although most athletic departments fail to earn enough to cover the cost of all their university's teams, the evidence suggests that successful big-time programs help to attract applicants and raise contributions.

Whether the benefits of big-time college sports programs are worth the costs may still be a subject worthy of robust debate. But faculty members and administrators do a disservice to themselves and their institutions by pretending that the sports-entertainment complex is no more significant to a university's functioning than are its dining halls or art museums. Such lack of candor is out of step with the imperative we teach in classrooms and practice in laboratories—to seek and speak the truth.

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