

Faculty Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletics

Janet H. Lawrence

In 1989, John S. and James L. Knight established the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. Although it has no regulatory authority or oversight responsibilities, the Knight Commission's periodic reports are widely read and taken into account by decision-making bodies.

Beginning in 1991, the Knight Commission called for greater faculty involvement in the reform of intercollegiate athletics. These calls were joined by appeals from faculty athletics reform groups, such as the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) and the Drake Group. In 2006, the Knight Commission agreed to host a national meeting, a faculty summit, with an agenda focused on ways faculty might foster and maintain balance between academics and athletics. During the planning process, it became clear that data were needed to ascertain how faculty understand the relationship between college sports and other campus activities, as well as their interest in joining reform initiatives.

This chapter provides glimpses into the development of a survey undertaken as part of the summit and offers select findings regarding faculty perceptions of how intercollegiate athletics are governed on their campuses. Recommendations for institutional research are also proposed.

Study Background

The key question before the Knight Commission was where to focus attention. Should the summit consider a range of issues—governance, finance,

and academic—or concentrate on one aspect of intercollegiate athletics? To assist with such decisions, two advisory groups were established, one comprising representatives from different campuses and organizations concerned about the role of faculty in intercollegiate athletics (external) and another consisting of Knight Commission members and staff (internal). Intensive discussion with the external advisors resulted in an exhaustive list of issues and a heightened awareness of disparities in the perspectives of knowledgeable individuals, reflecting variations in campus contexts and personal experiences with intercollegiate athletics.

A literature review confirmed the importance of *campus setting*. For example, Cockley and Roswal (1994) and Norman (1995) find that faculty in NCAA Division II and III institutions are more satisfied with their campus athletics programs than their counterparts in NCAA Division I institutions. Noble (2004) finds that faculty on campuses with better records have more favorable attitudes toward athletics compared with faculty from schools with less successful teams.

Prior research also identified individual characteristics that may affect how faculty construct knowledge about intercollegiate athletics. Compared to their colleagues in other departments, faculty from kinesiology and physical education have more positive views of their campus's athletics programs (Harrison, 2004; Noble, 2004). Furthermore, faculty who hold governance positions and work directly with athletics are more satisfied with their institutions' athletics programs (Cockley and Roswal, 1994; Friesen, 1992).

Whether faculty members are interested in taking up the challenge of reforming intercollegiate athletics garners less attention from researchers. Trail and Chelladurai (2000), echoing the critiques of intercollegiate athletics offered by national reform groups, find that NCAA Division I faculty perceive that intercollegiate athletics is disconnected from the academic mission of their institutions. Kuga (1996) concludes that faculty in Division I universities may want to participate in athletics governance but worry about the high time commitment, as well as their competence to deal with athletics issues.

In sum, the conversations with advisory groups, combined with the mixed findings from studies of faculty that for the most part lack generalizability due to small sample sizes or single institution designs, underscored the importance of a comprehensive study. Summit discussions about faculty opinions and their potential involvement in change efforts aimed at restoring balance between intercollegiate athletics and academics needed to be informed by empirical data.

Data Collection

After meeting with the external advisors, the internal advisory group decided to focus on the most visible campuses, those within the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (formerly Division I-A), and sample faculty with a range of intercollegiate athletic governance experiences and

teaching involvement with student athletes. However, the question remained: On what content areas should attention be focused?

Interview Study. To help with this decision, interviews were conducted with fifty-two faculty and provosts on five campuses that differed in size, location, athletic conference affiliation, and control (public versus private). After consultation with individuals on each campus and information gathered from university Web sites, interview subjects were purposively selected to include faculty engaged in institutional governance generally, and intercollegiate athletics specifically, as well as those from areas with high undergraduate enrollments who may or may not be engaged in governance beyond their departments. The semistructured interviews included questions about academic, governance, and financial issues to find out what concerns were most compelling, which areas faculty knew the most and least about, and why they would—or would not—be inclined to contribute to campus efforts to ameliorate athletics problems that most concerned them.

Another goal of the interviews was to find ways to capture the attention of faculty who indicate minimal interest and engagement with matters pertaining to college sports. Documents available from COIA, the American Association of University Professors, and the Drake Group offer insights into what is on the minds of faculty invested in the reform of intercollegiate athletics. However, given that a goal of the summit was to build faculty support, we paid particular attention to what those who professed little knowledge had to say and how they articulated their concerns. This proved to be critical as we framed survey questions.

Survey Instrument Development. The interviews resulted in four key decisions. First, faculty interest appeared to be evenly distributed across academic, finance, and governance matters. Thus, data relevant to all three would be collected. Second, faculty perceptions of intercollegiate athletics intertwine with their views of the larger campus context. Consistent with prior research such as that by Cockley and Roswal (1994), professors' beliefs about athletics are shaped by their experiences in various domains of campus life. For example, their experiences with admissions for performance majors or family legacies influence their beliefs about special admissions of student athletes; levels of departmental resources affect how they respond to the financing of college sports; and perceptions of campus values regarding shared governance in general influence their views of faculty oversight of intercollegiate athletics. Therefore, we included parallel survey questions about campus policies and practices related and unrelated to athletics. For instance, one set of items inquired about academic advising of all undergraduate students, and another set asked about academic advising for student athletes.

The third decision was to assess respondents' prioritization of intercollegiate athletics in relation to other campus issues pressing for faculty attention, including student financial aid or resources for research. And finally, given research on faculty work-related decisions (Blackburn and Lawrence, 1995) and interview findings, we chose to assess intentions to become

involved in campus reform initiatives in areas where personal investment is likely to be strong. Questions about joining campus change efforts focus on the specific athletics-related concern each respondent cited as personally most important.

The faculty survey questionnaire contains both open-ended and Likert-type items distributed across five sections:

- *Perceptions and Beliefs* (Likert-type questions): Faculty indicate on a scale ranging from Not at All to Very Much (and including Don't Know and Not Relevant options) the extent to which they believe selected institutional policies and practices, as well as behaviors and attitudes of students, student athletes, campus administrators, coaches, and faculty, apply to their campuses.
- *Satisfaction* (Likert-type questions): Respondents indicate on a scale ranging from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied (including a Not Relevant option as well) their satisfaction with general and athletics-specific policies, practices, and conditions on their campuses (such as the use of special admissions for high school athletes who do not meet regular academic standards) as well as student, administrator, and faculty behavior related to governance, academics, and finance (including that athletes are good representatives of the university in their public behavior and statements to the press).
- *Campus Priorities*: Individuals indicate on a scale of Very Low to Very High the priority they believed faculty governance groups must give over the next five years to each of thirteen areas confronting faculty governance bodies, including intercollegiate athletics.
- *Major Concerns*: An open-ended item asks faculty what most concerns them about intercollegiate athletics on their campus. Respondents who state a concern are asked to indicate the chances they would join a campus-based initiative to address this problem and estimate the likelihood that such an activity would result in meaningful change on their campus.
- *Demographic Characteristics*: Questions address the respondents' careers (for example, tenure status, field of teaching, years at institution) as well as their experience with faculty governance, intercollegiate athletics and student athletes, their sources of information about intercollegiate athletics, their current investment of time in undergraduate teaching, research and service, and their personal experiences as student-athletes.

The Faculty Survey (see Lawrence, Hendricks, and Ott, 2007, for a copy of instrument) was made available to respondents both online and in paper format. The online version was programmed so that a participant could exit and resume the survey at any time with previously completed responses already saved on the screen. On average, the questionnaire required twenty to thirty minutes to complete.

Sampling Strategy. Given that one goal was to paint a comprehensive picture of faculty beliefs about intercollegiate athletics, a purposive sample

was drawn from the population of 119 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions classified by the NCAA in 2006. To ensure geographical coverage, two universities were randomly selected from each of the eleven FBS conferences, and one was randomly drawn from the unaffiliated campuses. We then used online information and campus directories to choose tenure-track faculty on each campus who were currently involved in institution-level campus governance (such as faculty senates) or in roles associated with the oversight of intercollegiate athletics (for example, Faculty Athletic Representatives, members of campus athletics advisory boards, or NCAA certification teams) and who had appointments in fields that typically enroll larger numbers of undergraduate students, thus increasing the chances of interactions between respondents and student athletes. We assumed the latter group includes individuals whose involvement in the oversight of intercollegiate athletics differs. However, the sample was limited to tenure-track faculty because on some campuses, governance committee membership may be limited to this group.

E-mail messages were sent to 14,187 faculty members on twenty-three campuses. Out of this group, 13,604 individuals received invitations to participate, and 3,005 completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 23 percent, a rate typical for online surveys (Sheehan, 2001). Although the response was low, nevertheless it was encouraging given that we sought participation from people we knew had scant interest in the focal topic. Adjusted for those who did not fully complete the survey, faculty on sabbatical, emeritus faculty, non-tenure-track faculty, and administrators inadvertently included, the final individual sample used in the analyses was 2,071.

The selection strategy produced a sample that resembles the national profile of faculty in its distribution across gender, race, professorial ranks, and tenure status. Three campuses are private, and twenty are public. More than 75 percent of survey respondents currently teach or have in the past taught student athletes, and 14 percent say they are now serving, or in the past have served, in intercollegiate athletics governance roles (see Lawrence, Hendricks, and Ott, 2007).

Data Analysis and Results

After reviewing the preliminary findings, the internal advisory committee decided a digest of primarily descriptive statistics would best serve to frame summit topics and ground discussions across the range of topics. However, subsequent analyses have been undertaken to assess faculty support for different reform proposals (Lawrence, Ott, and Hendricks, 2007), respond to a historical analysis of faculty oversight (Lawrence, 2008), and explore theoretical propositions about faculty perceptions and prioritization of intercollegiate athletics as a governance issue (Lawrence and Ott, 2008). Findings from these studies that shed light on faculty perspectives regarding campus

decision making and oversight of college sports—and their interest in inter-collegiate athletics as a governance area—are presented next.

Faculty Perceptions of Decision Making. Descriptive analyses of total sample responses indicate that faculty feel disconnected from intercollegiate athletics decision making. Although the American Association of University Professors (1989) and COIA (2004) specify athletics as an area for shared decision making by faculty and administrators, the majority (62 percent) believes intercollegiate athletics is an auxiliary enterprise that is structurally separate and accountable to administrators, not faculty. Furthermore, most (40 percent) perceive that faculty roles associated with overseeing college sports on their campuses are ill defined, and more than a third (35 percent) believe administrators are not forthcoming with information that governance committees need to ensure the quality of student athletes' educational experiences.

Given such findings, it is not surprising that faculty tend to be displeased with their intercollegiate athletics governance roles: 42 percent are dissatisfied with the extent to which faculty input informs administrative decisions, and 44 percent are dissatisfied with the range of faculty perspectives considered by central administrators who formulate institutional positions on inter-collegiate athletics. Faculty members are also skeptical about the influence of off-campus groups. Half say that decisions about intercollegiate athletics on their campuses are driven by the priorities of an entertainment industry that is not invested in their university's academic mission, and 40 percent think athletics boosters who put winning sports records ahead of academic standards have influence with their presidents. Yet more of the faculty who express an opinion (46 percent) are satisfied than are dissatisfied (28 percent) with presidential oversight, and more are satisfied (42 percent) than are dissatisfied (34 percent) with institutional control of intercollegiate athletics. This outcome reflects the fact that faculty involved in athletics governance are less likely to say they have no opinion and are more likely to hold positive views.

Juxtaposing faculty perceptions of how administrators engage them in various institutional-level decisions reveals instances where they think athletics is treated differently. The majority (54 percent) believe faculty governance groups advise campus administrators on academic matters, while 48 percent believe it is not common practice for faculty governance groups to advise administrators on intercollegiate athletics decisions. Many respondents think it is not common practice for administrators to consult with faculty governance groups on budgeting for either the athletics department (49 percent) or academic units (49 percent).

These results portray the predominant views within the total sample. However, consistent with previous studies, we found that individual perspectives vary in relation to personal experiences and campus contexts, and any composite may mask deviations among faculty groups. Respondents with the most experience in athletics oversight are most satisfied with governance, and those with no experience are least satisfied. As noted earlier,

those more experienced are satisfied with presidential oversight and institutional control over intercollegiate athletics and the level of cooperation between the athletics department and faculty groups responsible for upholding academic standards. The least experienced faculty are dissatisfied with all aspects of governance, and particularly the range of faculty perspectives considered by central administrators when institutional positions on intercollegiate athletics are formulated.

The results of regression analyses provide supplementary evidence that faculty beliefs about intercollegiate athletics are shaped by their experiences in other domains of college life. To illustrate, faculty who strongly believe academic issues are resolved at their university through collaborative decision making with administrators are significantly more likely to believe faculty are involved in decisions about intercollegiate athletics. Faculty members who are the most skeptical about collaborative decision making are significantly more likely to perceive the athletics department as an auxiliary enterprise with ambiguous policies and practices.

To further examine the impact of campus context, we created a taxonomy that differentiates sampled institutions along two dimensions: academics and athletics performance. With the advice of internal project advisors, variables representing each dimension were identified and, for each institution, combined into composite measures representing overall athletics performance and overall academic performance. Due to the relatively small number of institutions sampled, the continua were divided in half at the median calculated score for the overall sample. The result is a two-by-two taxonomy, distinguishing among institutions above and below the average in one or both of academic and athletics performance (see Lawrence, Hendricks, and Ott, 2007, for details).

Qualitative analyses of all faculty responses within each of the quadrants were completed, and predominant patterns in their perceptions and concerns were abstracted. We found that faculty from the Lower Academic Performance/Lower Athletic Performance and the Lower Academic Performance/Higher Athletic Performance institutions expressed apprehensions about oversight, albeit different ones. Those in the former group are dissatisfied with athletics governance and the perceived subsidization of college sports at the expense of academics. They want to give higher priority to intercollegiate athletics as a faculty governance issue. Faculty members in the latter group are troubled by the structural separation and power of athletics departments combined with the apparent influence of external groups on intercollegiate athletics decisions.

Faculty Indifference. Within the total sample, the largest group of respondents (47 percent) perceives their colleagues are interested in athletics governance issues. Yet when asked to prioritize a list of thirteen issues confronting faculty governance bodies today, intercollegiate athletics places next to last in terms of importance.

Furthermore, more than a third of the faculty say they lack sufficient knowledge or have no opinion about issues central to the efforts of reform groups and matters pertaining to campus oversight of intercollegiate athletics—for example, the types of intercollegiate athletics governance roles that faculty assume and the levels of cooperation between athletics and academic departments at their universities. Given such data, it is tempting to conclude faculty do not know and do not care; they are indifferent. However, this is like saying that people who do not know the Dow Jones closing average do not care about the economy. This is an overgeneralization.

We explored the complex empirical links between knowledge and caring by first creating variables to represent each respondent's level of knowledge about intercollegiate athletics governance (the percentage of "don't know" responses) and several indexes of "caring": (1) the personal priority they give to intercollegiate athletics as a campus governance matter, (2) the self-reported likelihood they would join a campus initiative to address their personal concerns, and (3) their subjective estimates of the probability that faculty initiatives designed to improve intercollegiate athletics would result in meaningful change on their campus. Analyses were conducted to determine if less informed faculty were more likely to be indifferent.

We found that a lack of knowledge about governance significantly decreases the odds that faculty members would join a campus change initiative but does not affect their sense that efforts would lead to change. When the level of knowledge and potential impact data are graphed, the two lines are essentially parallel, suggesting that those who are pessimistic about the impact of athletics-related campus initiatives are cynical no matter how much knowledge they possess (Lawrence, 2008).

Another set of analyses was undertaken to find out if faculty perceptions of organizational politics (POP) around intercollegiate athletics decisions affect their prioritization of intercollegiate athletics as a governance matter. Two indicators of POP, *speaking out* (in other words, individuals are discouraged from being critical of administrators) and *in-groups* (cliques with power that hinder organizational effectiveness) were analyzed (Lawrence and Ott, 2008).

Several findings are germane to this discussion. First, the more that faculty members know about governance matters, the less they perceive that athletics in-groups (such as boosters, the media, politicians) are able to exert strong power over decision making, even after controlling for involvement in intercollegiate athletics governance. Second, the more that faculty members believe in-groups are able to exert power and influence over campus decisions, the less satisfied they are with faculty governance involvement in decisions about intercollegiate athletics. Third, the more that faculty members perceive their representatives are silenced from having a voice in athletics decisions, the less satisfied they are with overall faculty input to such decisions. Fourth, respondents who believe they are allowed to voice

their views on intercollegiate athletics assign higher priority to athletics as a governance issue.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

Given the need for baseline information across a range of issues, the faculty survey is comprehensive. A trade-off was made between breadth and depth of topic coverage. Although intercollegiate athletics issues are interrelated, in-depth pursuit of one area (in this case, campus oversight of varsity sports) would have produced more nuanced knowledge about faculty views. For instance, we would have liked to know what problems faculty associate with intercollegiate athletics on their campuses, what governance groups faculty think are designated responsibility for resolving each of these issues, and what priority they would assign to each problem. Such information could help guide local efforts to enhance oversight policies and practices.

When gathering and interpreting data, researchers need to systematically consider the contextualized nature of faculty perceptions of intercollegiate athletics. Within NCAA divisions, there are myriad institutional characteristics that have not been systematically examined and need to be considered. At the broadest level, our interviews and preliminary analyses of survey data suggest that regional differences—for example, the presence of a professional sports team—can affect faculty beliefs. At the campus level, a number of contextual factors, such as the general governance climate and financial well-being of a university, affect faculty views.

Nevertheless, creating institution-level variables presents methodological challenges. When we created our institutional taxonomy, we found we could not reconcile data from relevant reports because institutional decisions regarding the categorization of expenses were neither transparent nor consistent (for example, several choices about how to report athletics financial data to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and in accordance with the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act are left to the discretion of institutions). In addition, variations in benchmarks and statistics used to represent athletic and academic performance differed, and choosing between them altered the classification of campuses. We originally used the NCAA four-class graduation rate statistic as one of the grouping criteria. When the decision was made to replace this statistic with the six-class graduation rate, three schools moved from one institutional taxonomy category to another due to major differences in their performance on these two measures.

The faculty survey provides partial answers and a foundation for future inquiries into why faculty knowledge and interest in the governance of intercollegiate athletics may fluctuate. The dearth of research in this area, combined with calls for greater faculty involvement in national reforms, intensifies the need for inquiries beyond the single campus case studies that predominate.

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JANET H. LAWRENCE is Associate Professor at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, School of Education, University of Michigan. Special acknowledgment goes to Molly Ott, graduate research assistant at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, for her contributions to this chapter.