

The recent allegations that Michigan basketball players received money (whether as loans or gifts) from a Detroit gambler provide disturbing evidence once again that big time college sports is a two-edged sword. While big-time college football and basketball provide excitement for many, education for some, and riches for a few (notably coaches), these programs also have the capacity to seriously damage the reputation and integrity of higher education. Although we should deplore and attempt to discourage the misbehavior of those who break the rules, we also should acknowledge that the root causes of these incidents lie far deeper.

While most of intercollegiate athletics are both valuable and appropriate activities for the university, big-time college football and basketball stand apart. They have become commercial entertainment businesses with little if any relevance to the academic mission of the university. They are based on a culture, a set of values that, while perhaps appropriate for show business, are viewed as highly corrupt by the academy and deemed corrosive to our academic mission.

It is my belief that today big-time college sports cause far more damage to the university, to its students and faculty, its leadership, its reputation and credibility, than most realize--or at least are willing to admit. All too many institutions exploit young people, recruiting them with the promise of a college education—or a lucrative professional career—only to have the majority of Division 1-A football and basketball players achieve neither. The reputations of our institutions have been damaged by the misbehavior of boosters, players, and coaches, all too frequently tolerated, rationalized, and excused. Big time college football and basketball have put inappropriate pressure on university governance, with boosters, politicians, and the media attempting to influence governing boards and university leadership. The commercial culture of the entertainment industry that now characterizes college football and basketball are in direct conflict with the academic values that must characterize learning institutions such as the university.

As the Knight Commission has stressed, higher education must realign intercollegiate athletics with the fundamental priorities of student welfare, institutional welfare, and the dominance of academic values over the competitive and commercial objectives of big times sports as an entertainment industry. But this is not enough. We must go further and translate these into strong actions that both reform and regain academic control of big time college sports.

For example, it is time that we recognized that the first year of college should be a time for students to adjust intellectually and emotionally to the hectic pace of college life rather than compete at the varsity level. The current system of “grants-in-aid”, under

control of the coaches, should be replaced by need-based financial aid similar to that in the rest of the University. The compensation level of celebrity coaches, athletic directors, and others benefiting directly from the commercialization of college sports should be throttled back to levels comparable to other university faculty and staff, in strict compliance with university-wide conflict-of-interest policies. Intercollegiate athletics should be treated administratively as a student extracurricular activity rather than a commercial enterprise with direct reporting lines to administrative areas such as student affairs and academic affairs. The faculty should be provided with executive authority rather than simply advisory participation in areas that affect academic performance (such as admissions, student academic support, team competitive and travel schedules, and all other areas that relate to progress toward degrees). Finally, universities need to develop systems for independent audits that go beyond compliance with NCAA and conference rules and include other matters such as financial integrity and the academic and medical welfare of student-athletes.

Today higher education is entering an era of extraordinary change. Even the very survival of the university as a social institution is being called into question because of its increasing difficulty in meeting the needs of a knowledge-driven society. This time of great change, of shifting paradigms, provides a context and a rationale for once again examining the proper role and character of all university activities, including intercollegiate athletics.

We are obliged to ask the difficult question of whether it makes sense for the 21st Century university to conduct commercial activities at the current level of big-time college football and basketball. Is there any logical reason for an academic institution, with the fundamental mission of teaching and scholarship, to mount and sustain a professional and commercial enterprise simply to satisfy the public desire for entertainment, and the commercial goals of the marketplace? Why should the university squander its resources, distract its leadership, and erode its most fundamental values and integrity with these commercial activities, particularly at a time when it will face so many other challenges in responding to the changing educational needs of our society?

It is my belief that leaders of higher education should act to decouple college sports from the entertainment industry and reconnect it with the educational mission of our institutions. Clearly this will not be easy, as a century of ill-fated efforts to de-emphasize and reform college sports so clearly indicates. Those who benefit most from big-time college sports as an entertainment industry, the celebrity coaches and athletic directors, the sports media and the networks, the sports apparel industry and the advertisers, all will defend the status quo to the hilt. So too will those millions of fans

and boosters who see the American university only as a source of entertainment on Saturday afternoons in the fall resist change. But the forces of change in our society are powerful, and they are reshaping all of our institutions—our corporations, our governments, our universities, even our nation-states. This unique period of change for higher education may provide an unusual opportunity to reform college sports, to reconnect it with our mission as educators.

As we enter a new century of intercollegiate athletics in America, it is essential for universities to establish their own priorities, objectives, and principles for college sports. Higher education must then commit itself to holding fast to these objectives in the face of the enormous pressure exerted by the media and the public-at-large. In the end, college athletics must reflect the fundamental academic values of the university. There is no other acceptable alternative if we are to retain our academic values and integrity while serving the true educational needs of our society.