Michigan citizens, parents, and students are aware of the great financial pressure public universities are under these days as the state struggles to eliminate the budget deficits triggered by a weak economy. Over the last three years the University of Michigan has lost over 20% of its state support, amounting to over $60 million/year.

What to do? How about this for a great idea? We currently have about five times the number of student applications for admission than we can currently enroll, turning away roughly 20,000 students each year. Why don’t we take advantage of this pent up demand by offering Michigan parents the following deal: Henceforth all students will be admitted only to our lowest demand programs (e.g., math?, sports management?). However if parents will make a $20,000 gift to the University each year, we will guarantee their student a “seat” in high-demand programs such as economics, psychology, business, and engineering. Of course, if students don’t want to participate in our “preferred major” program, they could always go elsewhere and be replaced by another student on our long waiting list (although likely of somewhat lower academic quality). Just imagine, we could generate as much as $400 million a year for the University!

What is wrong with this model? Well, first it clearly amounts to extortion. Webster defines “extortion” as 1) the charging of an excessive amount of money for something or 2) the acquiring of anything through the use of force or threats. It is something that our society regularly sends folks to jail for, and it is certainly not an appropriate activity for a university. But perhaps more significantly, it goes against the entire nature of what a public university is. We were created by the people, supported by the people, to serve the people, providing quality education for a fair price, and serving a higher good than the mammon of the almighty dollar.

But, of course, in recent months we have allowed our Athletics Department to pursue just such a “preferred seating program” that amounts to blatant extortion, pure and simple, threatening to deprive our most loyal fans, alumni, faculty, and staff of their long-held place in Michigan Stadium, diverting dollars
from other priorities (philanthropic causes, the kids’ college education fund, the University’s academic programs), stirring up anger and resentment, and seriously harming the reputation of the University in the process. Why do we tolerate such blatant exploitation and greed? Why do we continue to allow our Athletics Department to operate beyond the rules of propriety and values that govern the rest of the University? Why do we continue to allow intercollegiate athletics to put at great risk a social institution of immense value to our society?

To move immediately to my bottom line, most issues and concerns about college sports today derive from the fact that the culture and values of intercollegiate athletics have drifted far away from the educational principles and values of their host universities. Athletics departments today embrace commercial values driven by the perception that the primary purpose of athletic competition is for mass entertainment. There is ample evidence that the detachment of intercollegiate athletics from the rest of the university, its mission and values, its policies and practices, has led to the exploitation of students and damaged institutional reputation to an unacceptable degree, and now with insanity such as the “seat tax”, have actually added extortion to the list of allowable behavior of college sports.

As a former Michigan president I must confess I have known the sin of commercial big time college sports with 5 Rose Bowls, 3 Final Fours, 4 Frozen Fours, numerous national championships, 7 victories over Ohio State, and a very serious scandal in our basketball program! After four decades as a college athlete, a faculty member, provost and president of the University of Michigan, and member and chair of the Presidents’ Council of the Big Ten Conference, I have arrived at several conclusions:

First, while most of intercollegiate athletics were both valuable and appropriate activities for our universities, big-time college football and basketball stood apart, since they had clearly become commercial entertainment businesses. Today they have little if any relevance to the academic mission of the university. Furthermore, 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.

Second, although one can make a case for relevance of college sports to our educational mission to the extent that they provide a participatory activity for our students, I find no compelling reason why American universities should conduct intercollegiate athletics programs at the current highly commercialized, professionalized level of big-time college football and basketball simply for the entertainment of the American public, the financial benefit of coaches, athletic directors, conference commissioners, and NCAA executives, and the profit of television networks, sponsors, and sports apparel manufacturers.

Of course, these two statements are nothing new. Many have voiced them, including most of our faculties. But beyond that, I have also reached a third conclusion: That big-time college sports do far more damage to the university, to its students and faculty, its leadership, its reputation and credibility, that most realize—or at least are willing to admit.

The examples are numerous.

1. Far too many of our athletics programs 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.
2. Scandals in intercollegiate athletics have damaged the reputations of many of our colleges and universities. (This morning I spent time counseling my faculty colleagues at the University of Colorado…)
3. Big time college football and basketball have put inappropriate pressure on university governance, as boosters, politicians, and the media attempt to influence governing boards and university leadership.
4. The impact of intercollegiate athletics on university culture and values has been damaging, with inappropriate behavior of both athletes and coaches, all too frequently tolerated and excused.
5. So too, the commercial culture of the entertainment industry that characterizes college football and basketball is not only orthogonal to academic values, but it was corrosive and corruptive to the academic enterprise.

6. Ambitious athletic directors and coaches alike have insatiable appetites for excessive expenditures on programs, on facilities, and on themselves that drive unbridled growth in athletic budgets and facilities, both distorting university priorities and burdening the university with considerable financial risk.

Clearly it is important for all of higher education to set firm principles for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics. The key to this involves establishing as priorities: student welfare, institutional welfare, and the dominance of academic values over competitive or commercial objectives. 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. In this spirit, let me suggest several examples of such actions that seem obvious if vigorously avoided by those who currently govern intercollegiate athletics:

1. **Freshman Ineligibility**: All freshmen in all sports should be ineligible for varsity competition. The first year should be a time for students to adjust intellectually and emotionally to the hectic pace of college life.

2. **Financial Aid**: Eliminate the “athletic scholarship” or “grant-in-aid” and replace it with need-based financial aid. Note this would not only substantially reduce the costs of college sports, but it would also eliminate the legal risks of continuing what has become, in effect, a “pay for play” system.

3. **Mainstream Coaches**: Throttle back the salaries of coaches, athletic directors, and other athletic department staff to levels comparable to faculty and other university staff. Subject coaches to the same conflict of interest policies that govern other faculty and staff (e.g., eliminating shoe contracts, prohibiting the use of the university’s name and reputation for personal gain, etc.)
4. **Mainstream the Administration of Intercollegiate Athletics**: Intercollegiate athletics is a student extracurricular activity and, as such, should report to the vice president for student affairs. Academic matters such as student eligibility, counseling, and academic support should be the responsibility of the university’s chief academic officer (e.g., the provost). Financial matters should be under the control of the university’s chief financial officer. Medical issues should be under the control of staff from the university medical center or student health service.

5. **Financial Support**: We should adopt the principle that if intercollegiate athletics are of value to students, they should be subsidized by the General and Education budget of the university. To this end, we might consider putting athletics department salary lines (coaches and staff) on the academic budget and under the control of the provost. We could then use a counterflow of athletic department revenue into the General and Education budget to minimize the net subsidy of college sports.

6. **Faculty control**: We need to restructure faculty athletics boards so that they are no longer under control of athletic directors but instead represent true faculty participation. It is important to keep “jock” faculty off these boards and to give priority to those faculty with significant experience in undergraduate education. It is also important for faculty boards to understand and accept their responsibilities for seeing that academic priorities dominate competitive and commercial goals, while student welfare and institutional integrity are priorities.

7. **Rigorous Independent Audits and Compliance Functions**: Here we need a system for independent auditing of not simply compliance with NCAA and conference rules, but as well financial matters, student academic standing, progress toward degrees, and medical matters.

8. **Limits on Schedules and Student Participation**: We should confine all competitive schedules to a single academic term (e.g., football in fall, basketball, hockey in winter, etc.). Competitive schedules should be shortened to more reasonable levels (e.g., football back to 10 games, basketball to 20 games, etc.). We need to constrain competitive and travel schedules to be compatible with academic demands (e.g., no weekday
Student participation in mandatory, noncompetitive athletics activities during off-season should be severely limited (including eliminating spring football practice, summer conditioning requirements, etc.).

9. **Throttle Back Commercialization:** It is time to forget about the possibility of Division 1-A football playoffs and drastically reduce the number of post-season bowls. Perhaps we should return the NCAA Basketball Tournament to a two-week, conference champion only event. Furthermore, we need to stop this nonsense of negotiating every broadcasting contract as if dollars were the only objective and chase the sports press out of the locker rooms and lives of our students.

Of course, the first arguments launched against such reform proposals always have to do with money. College football and basketball are portrayed as the geese that lay the golden eggs for higher education. However I believe these arguments, long accepted but rarely challenged, are flawed. Essentially all intercollegiate athletic programs are subsidized, to some degree, by the academic programs of the university (when all costs are included, such as amortization of facilities and administrative overhead.) Furthermore, in the scheme of things, the budgets of these programs are quite modest relative to other institutional activities (e.g., at Michigan, the $60 M/y budget of our athletic department is only about 2% of our total budget, and, more to the point, less than the amount of state support we have lost over the past three years!).

The current culture of college sports is driven by the belief that the team that spends the most wins the most. Not surprisingly, therefore, the more revenue athletic programs generate, the more they spend. Since most of the expenditures are in areas such as grants-in-aid, coaches and staff salaries, promotional activities, and facilities, many of the proposals in the previous section would dramatically reduce these costs. For example, replacing the current system of grants-in-aid by need-based financial aid would reduce these costs by at least a factor of two. Throttling back the extravagant level of celebrity coaches salaries (and applying conflict of interest to eliminate excessive external income and
perks) would do likewise. Demanding university control of all auxiliary activities such as broadcasting and licensing so that revenue flows to the institution and not to the coaches would also help. And reducing the expenditures required to mount big-time commercial entertainment events would also reduce costs, thereby compensating for lost broadcasting revenue.

More generally, the first step in reconnecting college sports to the academic enterprise is to stop treating our athletic departments, coaches, and student-athletes as special members of the university community, subject to different rules and procedures, policies and practices than the rest of university. The key to reform is to mainstream our athletics programs and their participants back into the university in three key areas: financial management, personnel policies, and educational practices.

Financial management: Athletics departments should be subject to the same financial controls, policies, and procedures as other university units. Their financial operations should report directly to the chief financial officer of the university and be subject to rigorous internal and external audit requirements and full public disclosure as an independent (rather than consolidated) financial unit. All external financial arrangements, including those with athletic organizations (e.g., conferences and the NCAA), commercial concerns (e.g., licensing, broadcasting, endorsements), and foundation/booster organizations should be under the strict control of the university’s chief financial official and subject to rigorous external audits and public disclosure. (And clearly programs that push the bounds both of propriety and perhaps even legality such as the “seat tax” should be prohibited.) In that regard, I would even suggest that we take the Sarbanes-Oxley approach, designed to eliminate abuses in the financial operations of publicly-held corporations, by requiring the Athletic Director, President, and chair of the Governing Board to sign annual financial statements and hold them legally accountable should these later be found to be fraudulent.

Personnel: All athletics department staff (including coaches) should be subject to the same conflict-of-interest policies that apply to other university staff and
faculty. For example, coaches should no longer be allowed to exploit the reputation of the university for personal gain through endorsements or special arrangements with commercial vendors (e.g., sports apparel companies, broadcasting, automobile dealers). Employment agreements for coaches should conform to those characterizing other staff and should be subject to review by university financial and personnel units. All personnel searches, including those for coaches, should comply fully with the policies and practices characterizing other staff (e.g., equal opportunity).

Academics: Athletics programs should not be allowed to interfere with or undermine academic policies and principles. For example, the admission of student athletes, their academic standing, and their eligibility for athletic competition must be controlled by the faculty. There should be a ban on special academic support activities for student athletes that further isolate them from the rest of the student body and the university, such as academic support centers or special counseling services under the control of the athletics department. Universities must insist that competitive schedules are compatible with the academic calendar, even if this has significant revenue implications.

But how could one accomplish such an agenda? After all, a century of efforts to reform college sports have been largely ineffective. First, it is time to acknowledge that working through athletic organizations such as the NCAA, the conferences, or the athletic departments is futile. These are led or influenced by those who have the most to gain from the further commercialization of college sports. It is my belief that you will never achieve true reform or control through these organizations, since the foxes are in firm control of the hen house. Instead, reform efforts might more effectively proceed through academic organizations, characterized by the academic interests of higher education rather than the commercial values of the entertainment industry.

Several years ago, I received an invitation from William Friday, former president of the University of North Carolina, to testify before the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. My book on college sports had just appeared, and they
were interested in my views on this complex subject. After stating my concerns, much as I have earlier in this chapter, I went on to suggest a possible approach to reform that began with the premier academic organization, the Association of American Universities (AAU). If these institutions were to adopt a series of reforms—a disarmament treaty, if you will—for their members, much of the rest of the higher education enterprise would soon follow. It is my belief that such an effort by the AAU would propagate rather rapidly throughout other organizations such as the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and even the American Council on Education.

I concluded my testimony by stressing the point that as higher education entered an era of great challenge and change, it was essential that we re-examine each and every one of our activities for their relevance and compatibility with our fundamental academic missions of teaching, learning, and serving society. From this perspective, it was my belief there was little justification for the American university to mount and sustain big-time football and basketball programs at their current commercial and professional level simply to satisfy the public desire for entertainment and pursue the commercial goals of the marketplace. The damage to our academic values and integrity was simply too great. If we were to retain intercollegiate athletics as an appropriate university activity, it was essential to decouple our programs from the entertainment industry and reconnect them with the educational mission of our institutions.

After I had finished my remarks, the co-chair of the commission, Father Theodore Hesburg, former president of Notre Dame, was first to respond. He thanked me for not only reinforcing many of the Commission concerns, but, in effect, providing a first draft of the Commission’s report! Of course, others on the Commission challenged some of my more outspoken conclusions and recommendations. But in the end, my conclusions seemed to stand, as evidenced by the strong statement in the final report of the Commission:

"After digesting the extensive testimony offered over some six months, the Commission is forced to reiterate its earlier conclusion that at their worst,
big-time college athletics appear to have lost their bearings. Athletics continue to threaten to overwhelm the universities in whose name they were established. Indeed, we must report that the threat has grown rather than diminished. Higher education must draw together all of its strengths and assets to reassert the primary of the educational mission of the academy. The message that all parts of the higher education community must proclaim is emphatic: Together, we created today’s disgraceful environment. Only by acting together can we clean it up.”

*A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education*

The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics

June, 2001

Yet, in retrospect, I now believe that while both my testimony and the Knight Commission report urgently portrayed the threat to American higher education posed by the ever-increasing commercialization and corruption of big-time college sports, neither proposed an effective method to deal with the problem. Put simply, in both cases we bet on the wrong horse. We proposed that the university presidents take the lead in the reform of college sports, whether through academic organizations such as the AAU and ACE (my proposal) or the NCAA (the Knight Commission). And nothing has happened.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. After all, university presidents are usually trapped between a rock and a hard place: between a public demanding high quality entertainment from the commercial college sports industry they are paying for, and governing boards who have the capacity (and all too frequently the inclination) to fire presidents who rock the university boat too strenuously. It should be clear that few contemporary university presidents have the capacity, the will, or the appetite to lead a true reform movement in college sports.

Yet, all hope is not lost. There is one important ally remaining that could challenge the mad rush of college sports toward the cliff of commercialism: the university faculty. After all, in the end, it is the governing faculty that is responsible for its academic integrity of a university. Faculty members have been
given the ultimate protection, tenure, to enable them to confront the forces of darkness that would savage academic values. The serious nature of the threats posed to the university and its educational values by the commercialization and corruption of big-time college sports has been firmly established in recent years. It is now time to challenge the faculties of our universities, through their elected bodies such as faculty senates, to step up to their responsibility to defend the academic integrity of their institutions, by demanding substantive reform of intercollegiate athletics.

To their credit, several faculty groups have responded well to this challenge and stepped forward to propose a set of principles for the athletic programs conducted by their institutions. Beginning first in the Pac Ten Conference universities, then propagating to the Big Ten and Atlantic Coast Conferences, and most recently considered and adopted by the American Association of University Professors, such principles provide a firm foundation for true reform in college sports.²

The next obvious step in this process is for the faculties to challenge the trustees of our universities, who in the end must be held accountable for the integrity of their institutions.³ To be sure, there will always be some trustees who are more beholden to the football coach than to academic values. But most university trustees are dedicated volunteers with deep commitments to their institutions and to the educational mission of the university. Furthermore, while some governing boards may inhibit the efforts of university presidents willing to challenge the sports establishment, few governing boards can withstand a concerted effort by their faculty to hold them accountable for the integrity of their institution. In this spirit, several faculty groups have already begun this phase of the process by launching a dialogue with university trustees through the Association of Governing Boards.

Even if university presidents are reluctant to challenge the status quo, the faculty has been provided with the both the responsibility and the status (e.g., tenure) to protect the academic values of the university and the integrity of its education
programs. Furthermore, as trustees understand and accept their stewardship for welfare of their institutions, they will recognize that their clear financial, legal, and public accountability compels them to listen and respond to the challenge of academic integrity from their faculties. The American university is simply too important to the future of our nation to be threatened by the ever increasing commercialization, professionalization, and corruption of intercollegiate athletics.

Two last comments: First, you want to know the real way to deal with Michigan Athletics’ “seat tax”? Just demand that if the Athletics Department really needs money this badly, they should stop the practice of providing free tickets (so-called “comp” tickets) to everybody—regents, the administration, past presidents, Athletics Department staff, and yes, even the sport press itself. If we’re going to gouge most of our loyal fans with a seat tax, no one should be exempt. I suspect that shortly after each regent receives a bill in the spring for the $3,200 it would cost for their 4 tickets in “preferred seating”, this insanity would quickly be brought to an end, just as Venturi’s notorious halo was dismantled after the regents realized the damage it was doing to the University.

Second, I recall a quote from Thomas Paine’s Common Sense (February 14, 1776) that applies to this talk:

“Perhaps the sentiments contained in these pages are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favour; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

Only time will tell…

1 The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education (Miami: Knight Foundation, 2001).