

Some Observations on the Current State
And the Future of Intercollegiate Athletics

James J. Duderstadt
President Emeritus and University Professor of Science and Engineering
The University of Michigan

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The Context

Last night I spent the evening with a group of university presidents who form the executive committee of the Association of American Universities, talking with them about the future of our institutions, our nation, and our world. We talked about issues such as the changing and intensifying educational needs of our society, about how the powerful forces of social, economic, and technological change will force dramatic change in the nature of our institutions, how we serve society, how we are financed, even in our most fundamental character and values. Indeed, we even put the most unthinkable question of all on the table: will our universities continue to exist, at least in recognizable form, in the century ahead. (Some, such as Peter Drucker, believe we will not.)

It is this time of challenge and opportunity, change and transformation, that provides the context for your deliberations. Every aspect of the university, from our most fundamental activities of teaching and learning, research and scholarship, to our most important values such as academic freedom, diversity, and tenure, are being re-examined to understand whether they are relevant to our future.

It is my belief that it is essential that each and every aspect, of the university, each of our many activities, principles, and premises, should put on the table for reconsideration. Nothing should be exempt, particularly activities such as intercollegiate athletics that are clearly peripheral to our fundamental academic mission.

The Concerns

After over three decades as 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 are both valuable and appropriate activities for our university, big-time college football and basketball stand apart. They have clearly become commercial entertainment businesses. They have 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.

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 of you have voiced them, and I can assure you that most of our faculties have long expressed them. 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. They have been articulated at length by many, many others, and I will only briefly summarize them here. We have damaged our reputations (as the recent experiences of universities of Indiana, Minnesota, Northwestern, and Michigan have demonstrated). Big time college football and basketball have put inappropriate pressure on university governance, with boosters, politicians, and the media attempting to influence on governing boards and university leadership. (In fact, our Michigan governor recently attempted to talk Bo Schembechler for running for a place on our governing board!). The impact on university culture and values has been damaging, with inappropriate behavior of both athletes and coaches, all too frequently tolerated and excused. So too, the commercial culture of the entertainment industry that now characterizes college football and basketball is not only orthogonal to academic values, but it is corrosive and corruptive to the academic enterprise.

The Goals

It is important to first set firm principles for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics. The Knight Commission made a good start on this in its earlier effort a decade ago. 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:

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.)

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.

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.)

Mainstream the Administration of Intercollegiate Athletics: Intercollegiate athletics is a student extracurricular activities 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.

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.

Faculty control: We need to restructure faculty athletics boards so that 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.

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.

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 competition). Student participation in mandatory, noncompetitive athletics activities during off season should be severely limited (including eliminating spring football practice, summer conditioning requirements, etc.).

Throttle Back Commercialization: It is time to forget about the possibility of Division 1-A football playoffs and 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 have the sports press out of the lockerrooms and lives of our students.

Some Other Possibilities (perhaps tilting with windmills):

- Return football to limited substitution, single platoon models (thereby reducing squad, coaching staff, and costs by half, reducing the specialization that leads to 300 pound linemen and overspecialization of players, and decoupling college football from the professional leagues).
- Eliminate not only summer basketball leagues but summer sports camps conducted by college coaches (currently used largely as recruiting and income generating activities).
- Insist that the National Football League and National Basketball Association launch minor professional leagues similar to those associated with professional baseball and ice hockey. This would allow those young athletes with little interest in college to develop their skills for professional careers. It would get universities out of the business of being the minor leagues for the NFL and NBA.

Show Me the Money

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 \$45 M/y budget of our athletic department is only about 1% of our total budget, and, more to the point, less than 10% of our current tuition revenue base).

The current culture of college sports is driven by the belief that the team that spends the most wins. 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. Moving to limited substitution paradigms for college football would reduce the costs of these expensive programs by half or more. And reducing the expenditures required to mount big-time commercial entertainment events would also reduce costs (that could compensate to some degree for lost income).

The Process

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.

Instead, I believe one must work through academic organizations, characterized by the academic interests of higher education rather than the commercial values of the entertainment industry. Furthermore, it is important to begin with those academic

associations characterized by membership with similar academic standards and objectives, since this is most likely to lead to consensus on extracurricular matters.

To be more specific, one might begin with the premier academic organization, the Association of American Universities (AAU), which consists of the top sixty research universities in America. If these institutions were to adopt a series of reforms for their members, much of the rest of the higher education enterprise would soon follow. Suppose that key AAU members (e.g., the Big Ten, the Pac Ten, AAU members of the ACC, the Ivy League) could agree on a series of reforms. This would be sufficient to achieve a majority vote within AAU that could require all members to accept this agenda. The AAU could vote further that after a certain time period—perhaps five years—their members would only compete against universities accepting similar rules. Of course, non-AAU universities would be free to continue down the commercial path if they chose, but they would not be able to compete against institutions such as the Big Ten, Pac 10, and ACC unless they came in line. 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.

A century of ineffective efforts through athletic organizations such as the NCAA has demonstrated suggests that true reform of college sports can only occur through the academic associations that link together our institutions.

Concluding Remarks

Intercollegiate athletics should be and, indeed, are an important part of higher education. College sports provide an important educational opportunity to student participants. They are important as a unifying force for university communities, on campus and beyond. However, higher education has no obligation to conduct college sports in a manner responsive or subservient to armchair America or the minions of sports writers, entertainment promoters, or athletics apparel executives, particularly if this conflicts with the fundamental educational missions of our institutions.

Yet, 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?

Clearly my first preference would be to restructure, de-emphasize, and retain intercollegiate athletics on our terms. We need to decouple college sports from the entertainment industry and reconnect it with the educational mission of our institutions. In this regard, we must bear in mind that the focus of our reform efforts should be on those two sports where most of the problems arise—and, ironically, the two sports that were originally spawned on our campuses—college football and basketball. While the many other varsity sports conducted by our universities face challenges, they pale in comparison with the two highly visible "revenue" sports that have been taken over by those who pander to armchair America.

Here, the key to the control of intercollegiate athletics and to proper alignment with the academic values and priorities of the institution will be the effort of universities to resist the pressures to transform college sports into an entertainment industry. The academy simply must recapture control of college sports from those who promote them for their own financial gain: the media, the entertainment industry, and even the coaches and athletic directors themselves.

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 sport 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.

If we are unable to do this, we must then insist that society respect our roles as educational institutions and allow us to spin off big-time college sports to more appropriate venues. Minor league baseball and hockey franchises have long provided opportunities for young, aspiring athletes to develop their skills while entertaining the public. There is no reason why similar leagues could not be created in football and basketball, allowing those athletes and coaches interested in participating in professional athletics to do so, and allowing our campuses to reintroduce de-emphasized versions of these sports back into our existing portfolios of intercollegiate sports programs. Certainly there would be some cost associated with spinning off these programs, particularly in the sense that the revenue from big time football and basketball would no longer be available to subsidize our other varsity programs. But these costs are a small price to pay to refocus our attention on our core mission of education and restore our integrity as academic institutions.

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.