

An Epilogue to the Paperback Edition of
Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University:
A University President's Perspective
March, 2003

"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."

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*¹
February 14, 1776

As this book was first appearing in print in fall of 2000, I received a call from William Friday, the distinguished former president of the University of North Carolina. President Friday had served as co-chair of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, along with Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of Notre Dame. He informed me that the members of the Commission had decided to reconvene to assess what had happened to the reform movement they had attempted to launch a decade earlier. He was aware of the pending appearance of my book, and he asked two favors of me: First, to provide the members with advance copies of the book, and second, to testify at one of their first meetings to convey my own concerns about the current state of intercollegiate athletics.

As it happened, the evening before I flew to Washington to meet with the Knight Commission, I was scheduled to meet in Chicago with a group of university presidents from the Association of American Universities to lead them in a strategic discussion about the future of the American university. These academic leaders were concerned about issues such as the changing and intensifying educational needs of our society and the degree to which the powerful forces of social, economic, and technological change would drive dramatic change in the nature of our institutions—in how they served society,

how they were financed, even in the most fundamental character and values of the academy. During our conversation that evening, some presidents even questioned whether our universities would continue to exist, at least in recognizable form, in the century ahead.

My colleagues accepted the premise that in the years to come, 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, would be need to be re-examined to understand whether they remained relevant to our future. They agreed that it was essential that each and every aspect, of the university, each of our many activities, principles, and premises, be put on the table for reconsideration. In anticipation of my pending testimony before the Knight Commission the next morning, I suggested that nothing should be exempt from this rigorous scrutiny, particularly activities such as intercollegiate athletics that were clearly peripheral to our fundamental academic mission. (Ironically, the chair of the AAU executive committee, who introduced me and moderated the discussion, was Myles Brand, then president of the University of Indiana and two years later to become the first university president to lead the NCAA!)

The next morning I took a very early morning flight to Washington to testify to the Knight Commission concerning many of the issues raised in this book. I began my remarks by observing that after 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 had 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, I suggested that while one could 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 could 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 were nothing new. But I went further to state my growing conviction 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 were numerous and have been emphasized throughout this book. 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. Scandals in intercollegiate athletics have damaged the reputations of many of our colleges and universities. 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. 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. 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.

In my remarks, I complimented the Knight Commission for setting out firm principles for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics in their reports of a decade earlier, with a particular emphasis on setting as priorities student welfare, institutional welfare, and the dominance of academic values over competitive or commercial objectives. But I went on to suggest that this was not enough. It was now essential that higher education go further and translate these principles into strong actions that both reform and regain academic control of big time college sports.

In this spirit, I set out a number of examples of such actions that seem obvious if vigorously avoided by those who currently govern intercollegiate athletics. Included in my list were the elimination of freshman eligibility for varsity competition, the replacement of "athletic scholarships" ("pay for play") by need-based financial aid, the mainstreaming of coaching compensation and employment policies, and the establishment of firm faculty control over all aspects affecting academic integrity such the admission of student-athletes, the assessment of student progress toward degree, and the constraining of student participation and competitive schedules to a single academic term. Finally, I challenged the myth that big-time college sports were significant contributors to university revenues, suggesting that the obsessive stampede to ever greater commercialization was in reality a fool's quest, since while it benefited coaches, broadcasters, advertisers, and sports apparel manufacturers, it had only negative economic impact on most colleges and universities.

Noting that a century of efforts to reform college sports had been largely unsuccessful (including the Knight Commission's own efforts), I suggested a quite different approach. I began by suggesting that working through athletic organizations such as the NCAA, the conferences, or the athletic departments is futile since these are led or influenced by those who have the most to gain from the further commercialization of college sports. It was my belief that we would never achieve true reform or control through these organizations, since the foxes are in firm control of the hen house. Instead, I suggested that 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.

To be more specific, I suggested that 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. If key AAU members (e.g., the Big Ten, the Pac Ten, the ACC members of the AAU, the Ivy League) could agree on a series of reforms such as those listed earlier, 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 those in the Big Ten, Pac 10, and ACC unless they came into 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.

I concluded my testimony by stressing as I had the previous evening to the AAU presidents 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 activities, 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, Father Hesburg 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 Athletics²
June, 2001

Yet, in retrospect, I now believe that while both my book 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.³

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.⁴ To be sure, there will always be some trustees who are more beholding 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.

Ironically, it could well be that the long American tradition of shared university governance, involving public oversight and trusteeship by governing boards of lay citizens, elected faculty governance, and experienced but generally short-term and usually amateur administrative leadership, will pose the ultimate challenge to big time college sports. After all, 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.

¹ This famous quote from Thomas Paine was provided by a long-time engineering faculty colleague of mine, Frank Splitt, Professor at Northwestern University, after reading my book. He suggested that the same quote would apply to a long-standing effort he has led in attempting to reform engineering education!

² The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, *A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education* (Miami: Knight Foundation, 2001).

³ Bill Pennington, "Unusual Alliance Forming to Rein in College Sports", *New York Times*, Friday, January 17, 2003, pp. C21-C-24.

⁴ Julie Basinger and Welch Suggs, "Trustee Group Plans to Join with Faculty Senates in Bid to Change College Sports", *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 31, 2003.