

## **For True Reform, Athletics Scholarships Must Go**

By JOHN R. GERDY

The president of the National Collegiate Athletics Association, Myles Brand, created a stir recently when he forcefully defended the NCAA's commercial efforts to raise revenues for its member institutions. "Commercialism *per se*" is not incompatible with the values of higher education, he contended in his 2006 "State of the Association" address. "It depends entirely on how the commercial activity is conducted."

Despite the outcry his comments generated among critics of college athletics, Brand is absolutely correct. If only he had stopped there.

Responding to those who think that "working too hard to generate revenue somehow taints the purity of college sports," Brand cried, "Nonsense! This type of thinking is both a misinterpretation and a misapplication of amateurism. 'Amateur' defines the participants, not the enterprise."

Talk about nonsense!

Division I scholarship athletes are professionals — and to claim otherwise is to ignore reality.

Consider the essence of professional athletics: pay for play. Despite Brand's idealistic rhetoric, the contract between the college athlete and the institution no longer represents the "amateur" ideal of "pay (scholarship) for education" when it is plain to everyone — coaches, fans, faculty members, media, and especially the athletes — that they are on the campus, first and foremost, to play ball. *That*, by any definition, is "pay for play."

The professional model is also about paying whatever you must for coaches, staff members, facilities, scouting, travel, and anything else that coaches believe might make the difference between winning and losing, regardless of how outrageous or remote the actual impact. Professional sports is also about playing anywhere at anytime to reap television revenues. And professional athletics is about the expectation that athletes train year-round and sacrifice their bodies for "the program." In short, Division I athletics, as currently structured and conducted, operates on the same basic principles as professional sports teams.

Yet educational institutions have no business being in the business of professional sports. It is time to dismantle the professional model of college athletics and rebuild it in the image of an educational institution.

Specifically, the athletics scholarship must be eliminated in favor of institutional need-based aid. The athletics scholarship at its foundation is the biggest barrier to athletes' getting a genuine educational opportunity. When you are paid to play, regardless of the form of "payment," everything takes a back seat to athletic performance.

Calls to eliminate the athletics scholarship in favor of need-based aid are not new. In 1952 the Special Committee on Athletic Reform of the American Council on Education recommended that scholarships be awarded based solely on academic need rather than athletic ability. In 1989 the NCAA President's Commission proposed establishing a need-based system for all sports — with the exceptions of football and men's basketball and two women's sports selected by the institution. More recently, the faculty-led Drake Group suggested changing to a need-based aid system as part of its reform agenda. While some may interpret those failed attempts to adopt a need-based aid model as evidence that it will never pass, an alternative view would be that it is an idea whose time has simply yet to come.

At first glance, it would appear that eliminating athletics scholarships in favor of a need-based formula would not be in the best interest of athletes. However, if judged on what is in their best interest for the next 50 years of their lives, rather than the four or five years they are on a campus, it becomes clear that eliminating the athletics grant will contribute significantly to athletes' chances of obtaining a well-balanced college experience.

An athletics scholarship represents a contractual agreement between the athlete and the coach. That contract allows coaches to view athletes as employees, bought and paid for by the athletics department, and has little to do with education and everything to do with athletic performance and control. If the athlete does not do what the coach wants, or fails to meet expectations on the field or court, he or she can be "fired."

A need-based financial aid agreement, however, is a contractual agreement between the student and the institution. Under such a contract, the student would continue to receive his or her financial aid regardless of what transpires on the athletics field. As a result, the student would be less beholden to the athletics department's competitive and business motives and freer to explore the wide diversity of experiences college offers. There is no more effective way to "empower" the athlete because it would fundamentally change the relationships among the athlete, the coach, and the institution.

Some argue that eliminating athletics scholarships would deny opportunity and limit access for many students, most notably black athletes. The question is, access to what? The fields of competition or an opportunity to earn a meaningful degree? With the six-year graduation rates of black basketball players hovering in the high 30-percent range, and black football players in the high 40-percent range, despite years of "academic reform," earning an athletics scholarship under the current system is little more than a chance to play sports.

A more likely result of the change would be that the black athletes would simply be replaced by other black athletes. While they might be a bit less talented and obsessed with athletics, they would probably be better students — or at least somewhat interested in academic achievement rather than simply using college as a springboard to the pros. What's the better lifelong deal:

receiving need-based aid that leads to a meaningful degree, or receiving an athletics scholarship that provides an educational experience that is a sham?

Another potential benefit of this change relates to the athletics culture on campus. How much of an impact does receiving a scholarship, and all the benefits and special treatment that accompany it, have on an athlete's sense of entitlement? How much does it contribute not only to the isolation of the athlete and the team from the general student body, but also to the creation of a team culture that is often at odds with broader academic mores and behavioral expectations? Could it be that much of the deviant athlete behavior that has been revealed in recent scandals at the University of Colorado at Boulder in football and now, apparently, Duke University in lacrosse is in part the result of athletes' believing their status exempts them from the behavioral standards applied to other students? Dropping the athletics scholarship would help to recast the image of the athlete from the current hired mercenary of the gladiator class to simply a student who happens to be a good athlete.

Finally, the elimination of athletics scholarships would have a tremendous impact beyond the walls of academe. As a society, we have lost perspective regarding the role that sports should play in our schools, communities, and lives. For proof, one has only to read the daily newspaper to see how high-school and youth programs have become increasingly competitive: coaches scream at 7-year-olds for committing errors; parents and coaches push children to specialize in a sport at earlier and earlier ages; parents sue a coach because their child doesn't get enough playing time; parents attack Little League umpires or even fatally beat each other at a youth-hockey game. Far too many parents and youngsters believe sports, rather than education, is the ticket to future success. While moving to a need-based aid system may not completely change that myth, our educational institutions should have absolutely no part in perpetuating it.

Other aspects of the professional model must also be changed. College freshmen should not be eligible for varsity competition. Spring football and out-of-season practices should be eliminated, as should off-campus recruiting. Basketball and football coaching staffs should be cut in half. Seasons should be shortened, schedules reduced, and travel more restricted.

Such changes would significantly shrink the sizes, budgets, and campus influence of athletics departments. Yet if you operate a business where expenses outpace revenue and where revenue streams are almost tapped out, as is the case with athletics at most colleges and universities — how many more stadium boxes can you build, and how much more stadium signage can you sell? — there is only one way to become solvent: Cut expenses and overhead. Shrink the operation. Many college programs and departments have been downsized or shut down when it has become apparent that they fail to meet their purposes or are drains on institutional resources.

Although college presidents have worked diligently to reform athletics, their efforts have failed to change the fundamental culture and operating principles surrounding Division I programs. Raising academic standards may result in a few more athletes' graduating, but history tells us that, more often, it simply heightens the bar for academic fraud, fosters a greater dependence on athletics-department tutoring services, creates pseudomajors to keep athletes eligible, and incites an arms race in the area of academic-support programs and facilities. Change that is more fundamental must occur.

That is not to say that intercollegiate athletics should be eliminated from higher education. To the contrary, the benefits and positive influence of university-sponsored athletics programs that are operated in a fiscally sound and academically responsible manner can be enormous. Even programs with commercial ties can advance an academic agenda and contribute to the institutional mission in meaningful ways.

Indeed, we must accept the notion that as long as we have athletics, commercialism will be a part of it. We must also recognize that the financing of American higher education is radically different from 20 years ago. Corporate-sponsored research, naming rights, and the commercialization of myriad other aspects of colleges' operations are increasingly common. And given a future economic outlook of increasing costs and declining revenues and state support, the pressure on institutions to set up partnerships with commercial entities to maintain academic excellence will only increase. Against that backdrop, the commercialism of athletics will look increasingly less radical and out of line with the financing of higher education in general.

In such an environment, athletics' potential to generate resources becomes more important. Thus, what's at issue is not whether athletics can or should be used as a commercial entity to advance institutional mission, but rather how to construct and operate the enterprise to maximize both its commercial and its educational values. The fundamental question regarding that challenge is whether the professional model, with its runaway costs, undermining of academic integrity, and win-at-all-cost culture, is the most effective way to achieve those ends.

Despite the growing evidence that the professional model is not, we continue to buy into the notion advanced by the athletics community that what makes college athletics commercially viable is the "level of play." That has led to a drive to mirror professional sports in training and playing, as well as in behavioral and management styles. It has been the athletics establishment's unyielding adherence to that notion of the "quality of the game," coupled with higher-education leaders' lack of courage to confront such claims, that is most responsible for the misguided professionalization and fiscal excesses of college athletics.

Little evidence, however, suggests that changes such as those that I've recommended would have enough impact on the "quality of the game" to adversely affect the long-term entertainment value of the University of Florida, Pennsylvania State University, or the University of California at Los Angeles in the marketplace. The appeal of college athletics rests not only in how high the players jump, how fast they run, whether they participated in spring practice, or whether they are on an athletics scholarship. Rather, a big part of the commercial draw is that the activity is steeped in university tradition and linked to the higher purpose of education. Alabama-Auburn, Harvard-Yale, Michigan-Ohio State, and Oklahoma-Texas will always draw crowds, be covered by the media, and captivate the public's imagination, regardless of the level of play.

The key to a successful athletic-entertainment business is maintaining public confidence and interest. Public perception of your "brand," or what your business stands for, is critical. Like it or not, the current NCAA brand does not stand for students who are pursuing an education, but rather for pampered, mercenary athletes who have little interest in attending class and are using college as a vehicle to play in the pros. A poll released by the Knight Commission on

Intercollegiate Athletics in January found that by a 2-to-1 margin, Americans believe that college sports are more like professional sports than amateur sports.

Most people want college athletics to stand for something other than turning a buck, preparing the next generation of professional stars, and winning at any cost. Deprofessionalizing the operation would actually *increase* college athletics' public and commercial appeal. Not only would its fan base hold steady and probably even expand, but corporate interest would also increase, as companies prefer to associate their products with positive and wholesome institutions. The public would be more likely to continue to support college sports, or, for those who have become disengaged, to reconnect with them.

Realizing change of this magnitude, however, will be neither quick nor easy. It will require the courage and will of college and university leaders to make athletics look like and represent what they want.

Higher education has been at the reform game, with limited success, for decades. That does not mean that there has not been significant progress in building the foundation and critical mass that can serve as backdrop for significant change. Despite a rash of recent scandals that has led many to suggest that reform is a lost cause, upon closer examination, there are many signs that suggest, for the first time, that the table of reform may finally be set. The writer Malcolm Gladwell describes the one dramatic moment or event in a social movement when everything can change at once as the "tipping point," in his book of that title (Little, Brown, 2000). We may finally be approaching the tipping point for revolutionary change in college sports.

Over the past few years, we have been treated to out-of-control coaches, several cases of academic fraud, and even a murder of a basketball player at Baylor University. Despite such discouraging examples, the third incarnation of the Knight Commission in 2003 represented the continuation of what has been a 24-year process of envisioning, articulating, building, and institutionalizing the structure necessary to support meaningful reform. This movement began in earnest in 1983 when the NCAA adopted a set of academic standards that significantly raised the bar for freshman eligibility.

The significance of the type and duration of the reform effort cannot be overemphasized. Reform of college athletics requires the building and coalescing of a critical mass of people, institutions, and organizations over an extended period of time to drive change. Besides the Knight Commission, other "outside" groups such as the Drake Group, the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges have been pressing for it.

Further, the context in which college athletics operates has changed — and, in some ways, rather significantly. For example, not only has public pressure for reform increased, but Congress is beginning to look more critically at the business of college athletics. Title IX continues to exert pressure on athletics departments regarding how best to appropriate resources. Increasingly, research is beginning to paint a more critical picture of athletics' impact on institutional values and outcomes. And where 20 years ago, talk of institutional control and compliance was unheard

of, a firmly entrenched and growing compliance community now works to instill a culture of accountability and integrity in intercollegiate athletics.

The situation is far different from the athletics cultures that existed during previous reform efforts. The seeds of reform that were advanced in the 1929 report on athletics of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the "Sanity Code" (or "Principles for the Conduct of Intercollegiate Athletics") of 1946, and the ACE proposals of 1952 were strewn on a barren cultural landscape. Today that landscape is much more fertile for seeds of reform to take root. We may finally be on the verge of the intersection of people, institutions, and ideas, coupled with a series of changing contextual factors, needed to transform the role of sports in our educational institutions. As those forces coalesce, the time for systemic change has never been better. All that is needed is the initiative that begins the avalanche of change.

That initiative is the elimination of the athletics scholarship, which would provide American higher education the much-needed opportunity to recalibrate every aspect of its relationship with athletics. We must get beyond the fear that eliminating the athletics scholarship and the department of professional athletics will cause the entire enterprise to collapse. To the contrary, it will make it more educationally sound, more commercially viable, and thus more effective in contributing to larger university purposes.

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