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Remarks before the Knight Commission

(Opening statements highlighting what members had said earlier in the day, which support disclosure)

INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the invitation to appear before the Commission today. I am an Assistant Professor of Sport Administration at Mississippi State University. However, I am here today to speak in my capacity as Executive Director of The Drake Group, not as a representative of the University.

I speak to you today as a person with fairly unique qualifications regarding the issues confronting big-time college sports programs. I am a former amateur athlete, a former NCAA Division I wrestling coach, and a longtime intercollegiate athletic administrator – a background similar to many of my colleagues in The Drake Group, along with experience as a higher education staff member and currently as tenure track faculty.

But my remarks are not to be about me, they are about The Drake Group and about the issues and problems in college athletics. Your time is valuable; I shall respect it by now getting to the point.

At the first meeting of the Commission, founder Creed Black said, “The time has come to face reality.” I intend to do so. This is about the Commission's failure to face reality, its failure to address the issues associated with big-time college sports. Mr. Friday said the task is “to see if we can find some real solutions.” I will give you a real solution.

But first some background.

BACKGROUND

It is commonplace to lament that we have had nearly a century of failed reform. Previous efforts have failed because they refused to face the real problem, refused to expose the problem in such a way that denial, explaining away, evasion, and avoidance, is no longer possible.

Focusing on shoe contracts, summer recruiting, coaches' salaries or television contracts is the pathway to more failed reform. The heart of the corruption that literally affects everything is academics; the heart of the academic corruption is in men's basketball and football; the heart of the corruption in big-time college sports is academic corruption that enables the generation of an ocean of tax-free revenues while exploiting college athletes for economic gain.

We must face the fact that within higher education, we have an incompatible operational model for intercollegiate athletics -- a so-called "collegiate" model based on the oxymoronic "student-athlete" moniker. In a recent Wall Street Journal interview, John Swofford, Commissioner of the Atlantic Coast Conference said, "We need to do a better job of differentiating between the collegiate and the pro model. In college, winning at the expense of other values is not winning at all."

We in The Drake Group believe that the Knight Commission, the NCAA, and others have not done enough to help change a culture that has little to do with education, and everything to do with winning and maximizing revenues in the highly commercialized college-sports entertainment business.

THE NCAA AND THE KNIGHT COMMISSION

This Commission was created with the charge that the academic corruption in college sports must stop. William Friday has said time and time again: "What has happened with grades and courses seriously threatens the integrity of the institution. The university cannot accept these practices."

Early on, this Commission was instrumental in advancing significant changes in college sport. That cannot be understated. But, what's happened in the meantime? The Commission has yet to endorse the most basic and needed step in solving the problem of academic corruption – disclosure.

Also, The Drake Group is intensely concerned about what we feel is the recent masterfully orchestrated co-option of the Knight Commission by members and officers of the NCAA. Here I call your attention to two essays by Frank Splitt, one of my Drake Group colleagues, "Lines Between NCAA & Knight Commission Now Blurred – Time for Congress to Step In?" and "College Sports Reform: Beyond the Knight Commission."

The NCAA now has a president with academic credentials who is advocating a reform measure touted to bring about a "sea change" in college sports. As presently structured, the measure relies on a doomed-to-fail reform tactic – the Academic Progress Rate (APR). We believe the NCAA measure adopts the language of reform so it can protect its moneymaking machine. I urge the Commission to "wake up," and not be misled by this showcase effort that relies on schools to report themselves, is characterized by weak enforcement and penalties, as well as bountiful escape hatches in the form of waivers.

We in The Drake Group believe that an independent Commission would be able to provide the NCAA with criticism and guidance when appropriate. The Commission needs to include members who do not benefit from the status quo and needs to work with other reform-minded groups, such as the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, the National Institute for Sports Reform, the National Coalition Against Violent athletes and The Drake Group

ACADEMIC DISCLOSURE

Problem-Solving 101 suggests that we focus on one big idea. We in The Drake Group believe we should be working to expose the lie that is the basis for the academic corruption in college sports.

Absolutely true? It is commonplace. As co-chair of the Knight Commission William Friday said: "What has happened with grades and courses seriously threatens the integrity of the institution. The university cannot tolerate these practices." But presidents, faculty, and Boards of Governance do tolerate these practices. Not only do they tolerate them, they cover them up. What to do? Tell the truth. As Barbara Tuchman once said: "Telling the truth about a given condition is absolutely requisite to any possibility of reforming it." What she didn't say was that telling the truth about college sports and its impact on higher education can have dire consequences. Just take a look at our latest press release.

Academic integrity in college sports will not be possible until the lie that is protected by the closed society of higher education is exposed. Efforts to reform college sports will continue to fail. As Frank Splitt makes clear in his essay, "THE FACULTY-DRIVEN MOVEMENT TO REFORM BIG-TIME COLLEGE SPORTS", no disclosure, no reform.

The lynchpin of The Drake Group efforts is academic disclosure. It is the only way to illuminate the academic corruption problem and to hold faculty accountable. It captures what the APR does not -- the truth. Academic records can be released to the public. We can disclose the academic majors of athletes along with the professor, advisor, athletic team, courses, and average course GPA, among other things. No individuals would be identified, and it is not a violation of federal privacy laws to do this.

Disclosure addresses behavior of the institutions, faculty, and staff, NOT the students. Disclosure will lift the façade on graduation rates by revealing things like Jock-oriented curricula, and institutionalized coddling, and eligibility maintenance. This is not education; it is exploitation of cheap labor to make billions of tax-free dollars. Disclosure will not embarrass or single out athletes, it will, however, embarrass and expose a corrupt system that has no place in higher education. Disclosure will open the doors for the rest of The Drake Group proposals to truly change the culture. Why? Because it will enable a college athlete to get access to a real education and a much better chance to use that education to be a better, more productive, and, most importantly, an educated citizen. We are not doing well when we coddle college athletes. We become enablers of academic mediocrity. Coddling does not serve athletes well when their game-playing days are over.

OTHER PROPOSALS

We do have other proposals that I will highlight briefly. For a full accounting of our proposals, please go to the Website, www.thedrakegroup.org.

2.0 GPA standard -- This commission was created to address the problem that college sports threatened the academic integrity of the university, yet there seems to be widespread avoidance of the Drake Group plan. Does this commission believe that a 2.0 GPA standard for participation in athletics, and other extra curricular activities, is good policy? A 2.0 means that you are a college graduate and it is considered a triumph for someone who enters college with weak academic skills

Freshman Ineligibility -- The Drake Group strongly advocates a return to “freshman ineligibility” and a one-year of residency for all transfers who desire to participate in college sports. There is no doubt that many are athletically ready to compete immediately in college, or for that matter at the professional level. However, most if not all, are not ready to compete, practice, travel, and complete a required program of study immediately after high school. Again this is changing the culture. What better way to say you are a student first, athlete second than by requiring them to be a student for one year, not compete, and adapt to a very challenging lifestyle. Requiring one year of residency before playing sports puts the decision on who will represent the institution on the playing field clearly in the hands of the faculty because eligibility would be determined by success in the classroom rather than by entrance exams.

Athletic Scholarships – As long as coaches and athletics directors can use factors related to athletics to determine whether financial aid will be renewed, athletes are under considerable pressure to make sports their main, and often their only, priority. This highlights the inherent hypocrisy in the term "athletic scholarship," a term that should be related to educational opportunities. To ensure that education remains the priority, athletic scholarships should be returned to a five-year grant and any cancellation should be unrelated to athletic performance or in the alternative, athletic scholarships themselves can be replaced with educational grants awarded on the basis of financial need. In either case, universities should be committed to athletes as students whose value to the university exceeds their role in athletics. This Commission has also stated the return of multi-year scholarships among possible reform measures they could support.

Academic Support – We also propose the integration of academic support programs for college athletes into the normal student academic support programs and not controlled by the athletic department. This proposal further reinforces the notion that athletes are students and should be integrated into the general student body. Separate athletic counseling centers have spawned eligibility maintenance and scandal rather than true advisement and tutoring. The goal of academic counseling is education not athletic eligibility. This goal cannot be accomplished in a setting that is compromised by pressure to produce winning athletic teams. Due to this pressure it has become more “academic control” rather than support.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Drake Group has a plan to reform intercollegiate athletics and return power to groups most disconnected from today’s intercollegiate athletic culture, the faculty and the athletes themselves. Our plan empowers individual faculty, gives them the ability to

defend their classrooms, gives athletes access to a real and beneficial college education, and significantly lessens the pressures we face from the intercollegiate athletic machine.

The Drake Group proposals aim to change the culture and make access to a true education the priority. This is not a radical plan, as many, including Myles Brand has stated. It is a realistic roadmap that does not tinker and manipulate. It does not bring about “incremental change” just so institutions can adapt, continue the lie, and shield itself so it can continue to chase the money without any real reform. Our plan is ambitious, some may say unrealistic, but the only unrealistic option is to continue down the path of least resistance and continue the demise of academic integrity for an athletic holy grail that will almost certainly never happen, or if it does – at what price?

We are now going to move more aggressively to advance our agenda. The Drake Group remains steadfast in its belief that along with its plan, a multi-pronged governmental and congressional investigation of the NCAA is required to achieve a breakthrough in college-sports reform. The fact that the NCAA is still recognized as a nonprofit institution of higher education appears to be a form of IRS-approved tax fraud – involving billions of dollars – certainly should be of interest to Senator Chuck Grassley’s Senate Finance Committee along with Senators John McCain and Jim Bunning, as well as Reps. Cliff Stearns, Jan Schakowsky, Tom Davis, and Henry Waxman.

It is our hope that our quid pro quo strategy – nonprofit status of the NCAA and its member schools to be dependent on serious academic reform --will begin to gain traction in various congressional committees to help get what Congress wants and what the higher education enterprise desperately needs—a cleanup of the mess in college sports. For more details, see Frank Splitt’s essay, “What Congress can do about the mess in college sports.”

We are calling on congress to get involved to clean up what is going on in athletics today – including the tax-exempt status of the NCAA. We will lobby government to assist in pushing our proposals, we are actively seeking grants and outside funding to increase our presence, research, and outreach. We are gaining more and more members by the day. I ask the Commission today for their endorsement and their partnership in The Drake Group efforts at government intervention. We also ask COIA and FARA to join us in working through the government to force real reform.

The Commission’s 1991 report, gave some common sense, and strong recommendations for action, but now it appears the commercial and revenue-generating model is too hard to resist. It now appears that the NCAA and the Knight Commission are working together to protect the status quo.

The Drake Group will conduct simultaneous research and analysis beyond the GPA’s, beyond the graduation rates, beyond the shroud of secrecy to keep the pressure on for true change and integrity. The fate of the future of higher education absolutely depends on it. It is time for action, and we reach out to the Commission and other groups to join us to

work to get serious reform in place. If this Commission won't join or endorse our efforts, we would like to know why not.

Finally, I urge each and every member of this Commission to read and re-read the material provided for you – Frank Splitt's Essays and Commentaries along with The Wisconsin Law Review article by The Drake Group founder Jon Ericson and fellow Drake member, Matt Salzwedel. These documents not only explain how there can be no reform without disclosure, but also provide detailed background information and a path forward – including that for disclosure, the first critical, and most important step in changing the culture of academic corruption. Again, any attempt at reform will not work without disclosure.

It is time for all of us to rise to the challenge, to demonstrate courage, courage to tell the truth and to truly change the culture of intercollegiate athletics, and truly change the culture of academic corruption in our institutions of higher learning.

Thank you.