

Best Remedy for the College Sports Mess: Transparency, Accountability, and Oversight

a CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

Our guest author marks his 5th anniversary of college athletics reform advocacy to reinforce the Drake Group's call for significant improvement in the transparency, accountability, and independent oversight of college athletics.

By Frank G. Splitt, The Drake Group

Posted: November 21, 2008

BACKGROUND – December 2, 2008, will mark five years since my memorable and inspiring meeting with University of Notre Dame President Emeritus, Fr. Ted Hesburgh, former co-chair (with Bill Friday) of the Knight Commission and author of the Foreword to my (then) soon to be published first essay on college sports reform.²

Taken together, this essay and my *NCR VIEWPOINT*, “Time for accountability in sports,”³ and can be considered as a 'five-year-anniversary' commemorative—reflecting an effort to:

- a) Capture the sad state of affairs in college sports reform where, after some 80 years of failed reform, it appears that America's sports culture has triumphed over the academic mission of its colleges and universities as well as worked to undermine the educational mission of its high schools;
- b) But still hold out hope for the future ... a hope keyed to Senator Charles Grassley's resolve to continue to follow up on the 2006 effort of the House Ways and Means Committee to have the NCAA provide justification for its tax-exempt status.

On one hand, the truth-telling *VIEWPOINT* is not what NCAA officials, school presidents and their governing boards, sports fans, boosters, and most elected officials, really want to see in print.

On the other hand, it is expected that the piece will help generate additional traction for The Drake Group's Congressional Initiative that stresses the need for transparency, accountability, and oversight of NCAA operations.

A PERILOUS SITUATION – The long-term, potentially catastrophic impact of the over commercialization of college sports—with its tremendous opportunity costs and its related cheating as well as academic corruption—on not only America's colleges and universities, but also on its ability to compete in the new global economy has created a

perilous situation. The gravity of the situation is either invisible to, or ignored by those in the highest circles of the U.S. Government. Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) and Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL, 9th Dist.) appear to be to be exceptions to this general rule.

The NCAA's continued success at professionalizing big-time college athletics, while thwarting serious reform puts academic corruption and cheating on par with prostitution, illegal gambling, and speeding violations as acceptable forms of social misconduct in America—it's OK so long as you don't get caught. The recent academic scandals at Auburn University, the University of Arizona, and the University of Michigan are cases in point.

As Bruce Svare has noted: "All too often, athletes cluster in majors that are known to have easy (or no) significant requirements. Much of their course work is phony, consisting of a "hidden" curriculum that is masked by grade inflation, numerous grade changes, extra credit, excessive independent-study courses, and the waiver of deadlines for dropping and adding of courses."⁴ Thanks to *USA Today*, the general public is finding out what goes on behind the veil of secrecy that shrouds the academic shenanigans in college sports.⁵⁻⁶ Unfortunately, academic corruption and cheating has the power to destroy the integrity of one of our nation's most precious resources—its colleges and universities.

THE KNIGHT COMMISSION ON INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS – It seems inconceivable: How could the Commission—formed to help clean up the problems with college sports—abandon its watchdog role and now allow itself to be used to further the NCAA's vested, money-making interests and its continuing exploitive commercialization of college sports? But this need not continue to be so.

The Commission can give thoughtful consideration to its founding purpose and then move to help support the effort to reform college sports by endorsing The Drake Group's three-step plan for reclaiming academic integrity in college sports⁷ as well as its related effort to have the U.S. Congress require the NCAA and its member schools comply with their tax-exempt purpose of keeping sports as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body—as well as require measures of transparency, accountability, and oversight that are adequate to this task.⁸

LOOKING FORWARD – The Drake Group, with the support of other reform-minded organizations and like-minded individuals from the academic community, will not only continue to update members of Congress and their staff members on issues related to the need for serious reform in college sports, but also, more importantly, support Senator Grassley's effort to affect a significant improvement in the transparency, accountability, and independent oversight of the operations of the NCAA and the athletic programs at its member institutions. It is my hope that Catholic colleges and universities will see fit to lead the way.

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NOTES

1. This essay is based, in large part, on e-mail letters sent to the presidents of all Catholic colleges and universities supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs as well as to the co-chairs of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

2. Splitt, Frank G., "Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education," IEC Publications, Dec. 31, 2003, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Reclaiming_Academic_Primary.pdf

3. _____, "Time for accountability in sports," *The National Catholic Reporter, Catholic Colleges & Universities*, Page 11a, Nov. 14, 2008, http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Time_for_Accountability.pdf

4. Svare, Bruce, "A Road Map for Reform of College Athletics," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Section: *The Chronicle Review*, Volume 55, Issue 12, Page A42, Nov. 14, 2008.

5. Lieber Steeg, Jill, et al, "College athletes studies guided toward 'major in eligibility,'" *USA Today*, Page 1A, Nov. 19, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/2008-11-18-majors-cover_N.htm .

All too often, local media shy away from this subject matter. Not so the *USA Today's* editorial board. It not only published an opinion on this investigative report headlined 'Majoring in Football,' (<http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/11/majoring-in-foo.html>), but also ended with a heavy dose of sarcasm, saying: "Perhaps the next time the NCAA reforms its academics standards, it should require some courses for school administrators. They could benefit from some drama classes, because their contention that athletes are getting a sound education is not a particularly convincing act."

6. Brady, Eric, "Athletes' academic choices put advisers in tough balancing act," *USA Today*, Page 1C, Nov. 20, 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/2008-11-20-athletes-advisers-cover_N.htm

7. Otto, Kadie and Lanter, Jason, "A Road Map for Reform of College Athletics," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Section: *The Chronicle Review*, Volume 55, Issue 12, Page A42, Nov. 14, 2008. Here are the elements of the 3-step plan:

The first step is insisting on academic transparency, would make trustees, administrators, and faculty members accountable for providing the education that recruits are guaranteed with their scholarships. Transparency involves releasing information on the educational system at each university (e.g., courses, majors, advisers, etc.) for student subpopulations (i.e., athletes, band members, etc.), without releasing the names of the students.

The second step is insisting that academics take priority over athletics at all phases of one's college career. Students would have to maintain a 2.0 GPA each semester (the minimum GPA required at graduation) to participate in athletics. All athletics counseling and support services would be moved out of athletics departments and into academic-affairs offices, and athletics departments would have to build flexibility into practice and contest schedules so that they do not interfere with classes.

The third step is requiring students to spend a year on campus before participating in athletics. Students would be given five-year scholarships based on financial need, not athletic ability.

8. Splitt, Frank G., "The U. S. Congress: New Hope for Constructive Engagement with the NCAA and Intercollegiate Athletics," <http://mtprof.msun.edu/Spr2007/splitt.html>