

The Binghamton Basketball Scandal: A Lesson for Presidents

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In his *Inside Higher Ed* article, "Closing Argument," Jack Stripling tells how Lois DeFleur, president of the State University of New York at Binghamton, besmirched by a basketball scandal in recent months, plays down the scandal, foreseeing minor NCAA trouble and accusing the SUNY system and its chancellor of overreaching while critics say she's missed the larger point.¹

President DeFleur could very well serve as the poster person for presidents beleaguered with problems and issues surrounding their professional sports entertainment businesses. The Binghamton scandal shows what can happen if someone blows the whistle on cover-up behavior by their institution—misleading, lying, and withholding facts to not only protect its NCAA franchised businesses, but protect related jobs as well, including that of the president.²

Sally Dear, the courageous Binghamton whistleblower, is the designated recipient of The Drake Group's *2010 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award*. Presidents can rest easy because there are all too few Sally Dears in academe. Besides, the NCAA has provided its franchisees with considerable wiggle room re: academic eligibility requirements for college athletes. As Carole Browne, a biology professor at Wake Forest University and co-chair of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, has put it: "I think that the sliding scale the NCAA established has opened the door for institutions to justify the admission of students who are unable to compete academically."

In the article an associate professor of finance and former faculty athletics representative at Binghamton was quoted as saying: "I think the NCAA probably will be the ultimate decider of what happens, so we'll see what the NCAA does. I think we have a better chance of minimizing the amount of penalty by having the chancellor get involved and actually taking as much responsibility as we can."

The first posted comment on the article, titled "Binghamton's in luck if the NCAA will decide," targeted the above quote saying: "a very telling quote, both about the NCAA (which is to serious concern about academic integrity as the Reagan administration was to serious concern for the environment) and the kinds of faculty selected to be athletics representatives. Too often, faculty bodies elect individuals from among the most gung-ho supporters of campus athletics who then become advocates for rather than watchdogs over an enterprise that regularly circumvents even the most minimal kinds of academic expectations."

I followed by noting the previous commentator called attention to the NCAA's dubious role in assuring academic integrity in collegiate athletics and then went on to say:

In 1939, when asked why he abolished the football program at the University of Chicago, President Robert Maynard Hutchins, who deplored undue emphasis on nonacademic pursuits, said: "To be successful, one must cheat. Everyone is cheating, and I refuse to cheat."

Today the degradation of academics in collegiate athletics is even worse than Hutchins could ever have imagined. Academic corruption/cheating now abound thanks to the NCAA's rule changes that have not been to support or reinforce their own stated purpose and principle of amateurism, but rather to increase their market size and revenues by professionalizing their big-time football and men's basketball programs at the expense of the education of participating athletes. For example, the NCAA's academic eligibility requirements allow for the recruiting and admission of athletes that do not have the qualifications to do college level work.

Selena Roberts captured the essence of the situation in a 2005 *New York Times* article when she said: "It is worth a take-home exam to discover how the brains behind higher education have lost their minds in the pursuit of football excellence."

How do the NCAA schools get away with it? A partial answer is that the schools operate as if they believe that what they do is only wrong if they get caught—most often by a whistle-blower, rarely by the NCAA.

But what has become apparent is that many schools have become masters of deceit and deception. These schools have literally made an art form of conjuring up education-lite, degree programs for their athletes so they can sustain the student-athlete myth and report high graduation rates.

The schools employ combinations of athletics-beholden and/or intimidated faculty, clustering of athletes in customized easy courses and special-study programs, as well as other innovative cheating and scamming mechanisms to maintain the eligibility of their athletes as well as rationalize the granting of diploma-mill-like degrees for far less than a real college education.

By no means do the school's reported graduation and academic progress rates mean that they play by the rules, that is, that they are fielding teams with athletes who are not only legitimate, degree-seeking students, but also are integral parts of the student body and the school's accredited educational programs, as well as not exploited for professional or commercial purposes.

Without transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, there is no way of knowing what's going on re: the real as opposed to the reported academic life of the athletes at, for example, Butler, Duke, and the other teams that the NCAA declared eligible for their 2010 March Madness basketball tournament.

Tangible evidence of institutional academic integrity and/or corruption is exceedingly difficult to ascertain, thanks in no small part to the reluctance of government officials to confront the NCAA cartel. Education Secretary Arne Duncan is a notable exception. Also, the role of the Knight Commission and well-known college sports apologists in aiding and abetting the NCAA's professionalization efforts cannot be ignored.

One can really tire of telling and retelling the same story. It appears that the NCAA cartel really thinks it's too big to fail in spite of its dastardly practices that have helped destroy academic integrity in all too many institutions of higher education.

Hopefully, Secretary Arne Duncan and others won't be fooled by self-reported graduation and academic progress rates. For more, see Note 3.

NOTES

1. Stripling, Jack, "Closing Argument," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 16, 2010, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/04/16/inghamton>.

In large part, this essay is based on my posted comment on Stripling's article.

2. Early on in my work with The Drake Group, I saw striking parallels between the Catholic Church and its players and those of the NCAA cartel—the NCAA and its member institutions. Although inspired by Peggy Noonan's opinion piece, "How to Save the Catholic Church," [*The Wall Street Journal*, April 17-18, 2010], <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304510004575186451300061536.html>, this observation was not pursued herein. Suffice to say, since NCAA cartel management practices mirror those of the Catholic Church in many important ways, school presidents can learn from the experiences of Church officials while the Binghamton Basketball Scandal can provide a lesson for Catholic Church officials as well as school presidents.

3. Splitt, Frank G., "Factoring Academics into March Madness Tournament Eligibility," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_NCAA_Tournament.pdf

The URL for this essay is http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Binghamton.pdf