

Cleaning up the Mess in College Sports: Demands More than Policy Statements

By Frank G. Splitt

Doug Lederman opened a recent *Inside Higher Ed* news report by saying what has been obvious for many years (if not decades), to wit: Members of college and university governing boards interfere inappropriately "in the hiring of coaches and other decisions, emphasizing sports to the exclusion of other, arguably more central, institutional matters." [1]

Letterman's remarks were prompted by the latest attempt by the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) to improve the operation of governing boards relative to college sports [2]—an attempt akin to painting brighter stripes on a paper tiger. Clarifying the role of a governing board—re: its fiduciary responsibility and oversight for intercollegiate athletics and to outline a mechanism for a clear two-way, chain of accountability involving board members, presidents, athletics directors, and coaches—looks good on paper, but has little chance of success in the real world of governing boards.

Just like the NCAA, governing boards have conflicting interests and are, as a consequence, wholly incapable of reforming themselves without considerable outside help. Providing the illusion of reform is a standard *modus operandi* intended to give the appearance that college presidents are exerting their authority to keep sports in perspective on their campuses, and that they not only have the support of their governing boards, but are not subject to interference as well.

This *modus operandi* is important as colleges and universities labor to preserve the status quo as they go through the NCAA's certification process. Here it is to be noted that the AGB and The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics work in partnership with the NCAA that has an amazing ability to co-opt its partners

The AGB policy statement says: "What's more, the increasingly commercialized nature of major sports at the highest competitive levels and a widening gulf between the athletic and academic cultures at some institutions and in some communities have negatively affected the reputation and public standing of higher education as a whole.....Restoring balance between sports and education continues to be elusive. If efforts to achieve an appropriate balance are to succeed, governing board members will need to lend consistent and public support to their chief executives and academic leaders who are at the forefront of such discussions."

But a whole lot more needs to happen as well.

Balance will continue to be elusive no matter what AGB policy statements say so long as the NCAA continues to promote professional-level collegiate athletics as moneymaking entertainment businesses via its aggressive commercial approach—making commercialization a priority for the NCAA and its member schools. This commercial approach exploits the labor of academically challenged athletes from poor families and the penchant for wealthy-booster board members to clamor for winning teams at any cost.

There is much work to be done to clean up the mess in college sports. As the AGB's Richard Skinner has said: "the time has never been better for the trustees' group and others concerned about public "cynicism" about college sports to do what they can to make sure that boards are "appropriately skeptical of the whole phenomenon." Also, the time has never been better for the AGB and the Knight Commission to endorse The Drake Group's call for transparency, accountability, and oversight of the NCAA and the athletic programs at its member schools.[3]

In the meantime, the wealthy boosters currently sitting on governing boards will continue to run roughshod over fellow board members and/or presidents on athletics issues; and, the AGB's campaign will prove to be an exercise in futility—that is, unless and until there is an appropriate level of government intervention.[4]

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NOTES

1. Lederman, Doug, *Inside Higher Ed* report, "The Board Role in College Sport," Inside Higher Ed, April 8, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/04/08/agb>. This essay is based on the author's comment, "AGB Policy Statement a Paper Tiger," posted at the foregoing URL on April 9, 2009.

2. Association of Governing Boards, "AGB Statement on Board Responsibilities for Intercollegiate Athletics," 2007, 2009, http://www.agb.org/userassets/documents/AGBStatement_Athletics_Final.pdf

3. Splitt, Frank G., "Best Remedy for the College Sports Mess: Transparency, Accountability, and Oversight," http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Best_Remeddy.pdf

4. The Drake Group, "'Open Letter to the President and His Administration," March 18, 2009, <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama.pdf>