

CLIPSGUESTCOMMENTARY

“Scoreboard, Baby Notwithstanding” . . . A Postscript

Our guest author explores the latest attempts to reform America's schools.

By Frank Splitt, The Drake Group, 10-12-10

Ken Armstrong, co-author of *Scoreboard, Baby* commented saying: Spreading the word about a new book can be a long and lonely journey." I responded by saying: "Getting the people in Washington to not only read the book, but to also act on its findings is an even longer and lonelier journey." This postscript to "Scoreboard, Baby, Notwithstanding" (1) tells a bit more about the journey.

UPDATE ON MICHELLE RHEE

The Democratic primary defeat of Adrian Fenty, by all accounts the most successful mayor in the history of Washington D.C., provides a good example of why members of the Congress are reluctant to question the NCAA about the justification for its tax-exempt status and haven't rallied behind the efforts of Senator Grassley and his Senate Finance Committee staff who have led an effort to rein-in the abuse of the federal tax code by non-profits.

Mayor Fenty who appointed and supported Michelle Rhee as chancellor for the D.C. public schools was ousted by voters after teachers unions campaigned hard against him in retribution for his efforts to reform D.C. schools. Rhee's retention along with her apparently successful reform agenda will now be up to a mayor beholden to the teacher's unions.

Rhee's reform agenda pushed the same changes embraced by *Race to the Top*, President Obama's and Education Secretary Duncan's signature education initiative; see Alex Wagner's report (2) that during an interview with Matt Lauer of NBC's "Today", President Obama made the case for nationwide public education reform, defending his administration's "Race to the Top" program, addressing charter takeovers of low-performing schools, and advocating for better teacher pay and benefits.

Perhaps President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan will walk their talk and use their influence to keep Rhee and her reforms in place. According to William McGurn, "...word is that Education Secretary Arne Duncan has been working behind the scenes to ensure Ms. Rhee stays on as chancellor, or that she is replaced by someone with equal commitment to reform. The fact, however, is that whatever magic Mr. Duncan may perform, 'behind the scenes' is no match for what his boss might do by speaking publicly." (3) Hopefully, Fenty and Rhee have not adopted the approach of Sancho Panza, and just laugh at our stupidity—viewing the attempts to reform America's public schools and its ironies in dark, sardonic humor. Rhee's struggle to turn the D.C. schools around would make a great story on its own, but an even greater story if tied to the film documentary "Waiting for Superman"—Davis Guggenheim's call to action for America's public schools.

GLOBAL REALITIES REVISITED

The loss of academic primacy at all too many colleges and universities supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs has not gone unnoticed by America's Asian and Middle-eastern competitors. They have prioritized the education of their citizenry above all else as they build world-class universities with laser-like focus on academics, especially science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, rather than building facilities for the entertainment of spectators or the employment of 'student-athletes.' (4)

Additional insights for Secretary Duncan and his key staffers as well as for school and other government officials can be found in books by Fareed Zakaria (5) and Ben Wildavsky (6) who provide global perspectives to higher education. The authors set the tone for recent Chronicle commentaries by Clara Lovett, Kevin Carey, and Richard Eckman whose insights can be related to Zakaria's and Wildavsky's futuristic thinking. There is also a sports twist to each of the listed commentaries that is related to the "Global Realities" theme in the referenced "Sports in America" trilogy.

Zakaria begins his writing on today's era by saying: "This is not a book about the decline of America, but rather about the rise of everyone else"—describing a world in which the United States will no longer dominate the global economy, orchestrate geopolitics, or overwhelm cultures. He provides a framework for conversations on the new global realities with his focus on "the rise of the rest" and by claiming: "In the realm of economics, diplomacy, and culture, a multipolar world is already emerging, in which several players seek to develop alternatives to American models and values that do not meet their long-term needs."

After giving due credit to Zakaria, Lovett (7) says: "To remain global players, American business schools will have to develop alternatives to the academic models developed in Western Europe and the United States in the past couple of centuries." It can be argued that college sports entertainment—especially at schools supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs—is a major sector of the American economy and, since the advent of commercial TV in the 1950s, THE most quintessentially American component of academe. But by no means is it a leading export and a component of American higher education to be modeled. What does "the rise of the rest" mean for institutions that are so proud of their athletic accomplishments via-a-vis their school's academic status as "the envy of the world?"

With reference to Carey, (8) it is not likely that these proud institutions will be flattered by international emulation of their athletic prowess and related "booster subculture." Put another way, other nations are not expected to follow America's lead by warping their academic missions to accommodate sports entertainment businesses.

Eckman (9) argues that a growing number of colleges are being led by people who have never had direct experience in the heart of the academic enterprise—would that this was the only cause for the imminent crisis in college leadership. Consider that most, if not all, candidates for the presidency of schools supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs are people that must first pass muster with powerful athletics-boosting trustees if they are to get past their initial interview -- no matter how great their leadership qualifications. This imposes a limiting constraint on the size and quality of the leadership pool for these school's as well as a severe handicap as the schools must now compete in the post-American global marketplace for higher education.

Recent experiences provide insights into the complex new environment in which not only schools that tout their athletic accomplishments but also schools in general will function in the decades ahead, for example, see Mangan. (10) Investing in attainment of superior athletic prowess and facilities does not bode well as a viable global business strategy in the post-American world.

America has the most to lose as it confronts new global realities with its institutional priority of athletics over academics—all the while handicapped by the public's continued obsession with sports entertainment. America's present-day position does not present a pretty picture. What to do?

The schools might begin by listening to Lovett who says: "In the 20th century, the United States was the unchallenged leader in higher education, not only for the quality of its universities but also for access to higher education.... America's political and academic leaders blazed that historic trail in the 1960s and 1970s, reaping great social and economic benefits by doing so. There is exquisite irony in the fact that they must now learn from others how to redefine and pursue that very same goal in new ways. But learn they must."

Also, in a recent op-ed, (11) Rupert Murdoch touches most of the bases with reference to hidebound cultures and big-city schools: Education Secretary Duncan's "educationally stagnated" students, Davis Guggenheim's "Waiting for Superman" documentary, and Michelle Rhee's plea for a stop to a teacher union's fight against reform. However, a larger perspective would have included post-secondary education where America's hidebound sports culture and powerful entertainment industry—including the NCAA, college conferences, as well as college sports broadcast networks—have contributed to the aforementioned loss of academic primacy at all too many colleges and universities supporting big-time football and men's basketball program.

Paraphrasing Murdoch: It's time we stop playing power games -- and begin ensuring that every high school graduate who wants to enter a college or university has the academic wherewithal to do so and leaves with a real as opposed to a phony college education.

If not opinion pieces like Murdoch's, revelatory books and commentaries, perhaps the "rise of the rest" and The Drake Group's determination and perseverance will help make a difference in the future course of America's schools of higher education.

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NOTES

1. Splitt, Frank G., "Scoreboard, Baby, Notwithstanding," http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Scoreboard.pdf .
2. Wagner, Alex, "Obama Makes Case for Education Reform, Defends Private School for Daughters," *Politics Daily*, Sept. 27, 2010, http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/09/27/obama-makes-case-for-education-reform-defends-private-schooling/?icid=main%7Chtmlws-main-n%7Cdl1%7Csec1_in%7C%7Cprogram173459.
3. McGurn, William, "Speak Up on D.C. Schools, Mr. President," *The Wall Street Journal*, Opinion, Oct. 5, 2010
4. Splitt, Frank G., "Sports in America: Facing Up to Global Realities," A collection of three related essays, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Sports_in_America_2009.pdf.
5. Zakaria, Fareed, *The Post American World*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.
6. Wildavsky, Ben, *The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities are shaping the World*, Princeton University Press, 2010
7. Lovett, Clara, "American Business Schools in the Post-American World," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pg. A22, Sept. 10, 2010,
8. Carey, Kevin, "For American Higher Education, the Sincerest Form of Flattery," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pg. A21, Sept. 17, 2010.
9. Eckman, Richard, "The Imminent Crisis in College Leadership," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pg. A88, Sept. 24, 2010.
10. Mangan, Kathleen, "Global Focus Draws Students to Europe for Business," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pg. A1, Oct. 1, 2010
11. Murdoch, Rupert, "If Schools Were Like 'American Idol'," *The Wall Street Journal*, Opinion, Oct. 8, 2010.