Aligning Athletics and Academic Values

American colleges and universities are unique in their sponsorship of intercollegiate athletics programs. Whether these programs reflect institutional missions and values has been a matter of debate since the first intercollegiate contest in 1852. While many of the questions regarding the value of participation for students and the governance of college sports have remained remarkably similar over the years, the college sports environment has changed dramatically. Athletics programs, budgets, and numbers of participants have mushroomed. The popularity and visibility of college sports has continued to rise to the point where today what many people know about colleges and universities is what they know about their sports teams. The pressure on institutions’ academic missions and values at all levels of athletic competition is fierce. Michael McPherson and Morton Owen Schapiro, presidents of The Spencer Foundation and Williams College, respectively, cochair the Ford Policy Forum, an integral part of the Forum for the Future of Higher Education’s Annual Symposium. This year, the Ford Policy Forum focused on aligning athletics and academic values in higher education.

Tension on Campus

At the big-time level, television contracts exceed $25 million for a single Division I-A football bowl game and are in the billions for the NCAA Division I men’s basketball tournament. To get a chance to play in those games and reap huge financial rewards, a number of key institutional decisions must be made about the admission of athletes, the reward system for coaches, and the financial support of athletics programs. These decisions usually are based not so much on solid information—since the effects are decidedly mixed and unclear—but more on how campus leaders conjecture that athletic success will affect their institution’s visibility, reputation, and fund-raising efforts.
Big-time money is not part of the college sports picture at the Division III level. Yet the same institutional decisions about athletics programs present themselves. And, interestingly, given the small enrollments at Division III compared to Division I institutions, the effects of a sports program on the social fabric of a campus can be greater at the Division III than the Division I level. For example, Morty Schapiro, who left the University of Southern California (USC) to assume the presidency at Williams College, notes that 3 percent of USC's undergraduate student body of roughly 16,500 participates in the 19 varsity sports USC offers. In contrast, about 35 percent of Williams' student body of roughly 2,000 participates on one of 32 varsity intercollegiate teams, and many more play on one of the 16 junior varsity and eight club sports teams that Williams offers. If you do the math, you will see that Williams not only has a higher percentage of varsity athletes than USC, it actually has a larger number of them. While 20 percent participation at Division III institutions is closer to the norm, when one in five undergraduates plays an intercollegiate sport, the effect on the institution's culture and academic environment can readily reach a level that warrants scrutiny on the part of presidents and trustees.

At the Division I level, the effect of big-time sports on the campus culture stems not so much from the participants as from the environment surrounding big-time games, which commentator Murray Sperber has dubbed "beer and circus"—an atmosphere that can pervade a campus for the duration of a playing season.

At any level of competition, fundamental questions about institutional mission and values swirl around college sports. These questions flow from the growing divide and tension between athletics programs and the educational values of the institutions that sponsor them.

Competing Logics of Excellence

Looking through his philosophical lens for a unique view of the problems of college sports, DeGioia maintains that the problems reflect a deep human conflict stemming from two contrasting understandings of excellence. He labels these understandings "logics," because once one accepts them as guiding assumptions, they catalyze and justify whole sets of decisions and actions.

The first logic captures Aristotle's understanding of the human condition: that life is a journey during which we seek to achieve balance, integration, and harmony among the many dimensions of our humanity. Our habits and dispositions determine where we fall on a continuum ranging from the extremes of deficit to excess; for example, courage is the balance between the deficiency of cowardice and the excess of rashness. This Aristotelian logic contrasts sharply with the second logic, stemming from Nietzsche's view that human excellence is found in the "limit experience." That is, exceptional people define themselves through exceptional accomplishments. Life should be lived at the edges, on the boundaries, in the pursuit of triumph. The Nietzschean logic's connection with athletic competition is obvious.

The tension between the Aristotelian and Nietzschean logics plays itself out in society and higher education, not just in college sports. Indeed, DeGioia notes, a fundamen-
tal commitment of the university is to encourage limit experiences while at the same time supporting healthy balances. DeGioia’s propositions for the conduct of college sports reflect the philosophical framework he presents and raise primary questions about an institution’s relationship with athletics that should be addressed long before specific programmatic details are considered. Perhaps most fundamental is the institutional decision about where it wants to be on the continuum of the two logics of excellence.

**Institutional Choices**

In the mid- to late 1800s, colleges and universities began to sponsor teams simply because their peer institutions had them. Suggs explains that today a number of factors affect institutional choices about adding or dropping sports, including NCAA and conference requirements and Title IX. Suggs, whose book on Title IX has just been published, cites a *Chronicle of Higher Education* study that found that of more than 1,600 colleges and universities, just 116 of them had proportions of female athletes within five percentage points of the proportion of female students in 2002–03. The proportionality test—that is, that participation opportunities for male and female students are provided in numbers substantially proportionate to their respective enrollments—is the first test of Title IX compliance. Not surprisingly then, the other two tests—that participation opportunities are being expanded or that interest in participation has been met—have been shown to be used most often by institutions to show compliance with Title IX. Suggs concludes that when colleges drop men’s teams, although Title IX is a factor, it is never the only or even the most important consideration in making that decision. Indeed, in 2003, 31 men’s teams were dropped by NCAA member institutions. Most of those institutions did not cite Title IX as a factor in their decisions; rather, state budgetary cuts and the need to balance departmental budgets were primary factors.

Suggs draws on his experience as a journalist covering college sports at all levels to identify specific examples of the use of athletics programs to serve purposes related to institutional identity and enrollment—for example, to increase male or African-American enrollment or geographical diversity in the student body. He says that college athletics teams are not now and never have been simply outlets for students’ recreational enthusiasm. Further, most colleges and universities treat their athletics departments as administrative units and not as academic programs—an inconsistency that makes it difficult to reconcile athletics dreams and educational goals.

**The College Sports Project**

The College Sports Project (CSP) grew out of work at the Mellon Foundation by William Bowen and coauthors James Shulman and Sarah Levin, who documented in two books the growing divide between intercollegiate athletics and stated institutional missions at selective colleges competing at the Division III level and in the Ivy League. Malekoff outlines important findings, including the fact that recruited athletes enjoy a significant admissions advantage when compared to nonathletes (in one Division III conference, recruited athletes were more than twice as likely as nonathletes to be accepted), that recruited athletes underperform academically, and that a separate athletic culture appears to exist on many campuses.

The CSP’s ultimate goal is to strengthen the educational value of the intercollegiate athletic experience for as many students as possible. To that end, the CSP’s coordinating committee, on which Malekoff serves (along with Mike McPherson), has distilled its agenda for change down to two key principles: representativeness and integration. “Representativeness” means that, ideally, students who participate on intercollegiate teams should resemble their classmates from the standpoint of academic preparation, academic outcomes, and participation in the life of the campus community as a whole. “Integration” might best be described as an intentional effort to encourage the athletic, academic, and student life dimensions of colleges and universities to work jointly in an effort to align athletics programs with institutional missions.

The CSP is making good progress on both fronts: An independent data collection center focused on a wide array of data related specifically to representativeness is starting up at Northwestern University, and a pilot Institute on Integration that will be attended by presidents, deans, faculty, and athletics administrators and coaches from 10 colleges and universities will take place at Washington University in the summer of 2005.

**Conclusion**

The relentless pressure to “keep raising the bar” in athletic competition—longer seasons, more practice, bigger line-ups, growing gaps in academic qualifications—derives from two essential features of competitive athletics: the
philosophical understanding of excellence in terms of “limit experiences” and the more pragmatic reality that every athletic competition is in its essence a zero-sum game. Both “testing limits” and “staying ahead of the pack” point in one direction: up.

The power of these forces is such that purely or narrowly rules-based reforms are unlikely to last long. Rules—for example, forbidding off-season practice or restricting recruiting—present themselves as just one more limit to be overcome or as another move in the competitive game. Meaningful and lasting change can only be achieved through efforts that engage and shape the spirit behind the rules. As DeGoia argues, this implies that campuses should seek ways to reflect seriously on the values that underlie commitments to athletic excellence, and their proper place in an academic institution. At the Division III level, the CSP aims to encourage such reflection through its “integration” agenda.

Tackling the “arms race” aspect of intercollegiate athletics is made easier by such reflection but requires other tactics as well. The College Sports Project aims to feed back to Division III colleges and universities objective information about the comparative qualifications, experiences, and outcomes of athletes and others on campus. The NCAA already collects and releases data on monitoring measures such as graduation rates. These actions facilitate tracking changes over time and reduce the space for “wishful thinking” about how things are going.

Creating these broader frameworks of values and evidence may help build a solid basis for more specific reform activities, such as those advocated by various members of the panel. Specific reform options discussed included changing the means of evaluating and rewarding coaches, restricting athletic scholarships and admissions preferences, encouraging community members beyond just coaches to draw meaning and significance out of their athletic experiences, and shortening playing seasons. Nobody has a magic bullet, but we may hope that persistent and thoughtful effort will strengthen colleges’ and universities’ ability to realize the genuine value of athletic endeavor in ways that complement their academic purposes.

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