AN INCREASING NUMBER of college trustees, presidents, faculty, athletic directors, and coaches are raising concerns that the once relatively seamless connection between NCAA Division III sports and educational goals is eroding at an alarming rate. While highly publicized scandals involving academic fraud, financial improprieties, and breaches of moral and ethical standards are largely confined to universities competing at the “big-time” NCAA Division I-A level, evidence suggests that not all is not well outside that highly commercialized and professionalized realm. Robert Malekoff, former director of athletics at The College of Wooster and senior advisor to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, outlines the key issues facing selective liberal arts colleges that compete in Division III. He describes the College Sports Project, an initiative aimed at more closely aligning Division III athletics programs with educational values and institutional missions.

The findings presented in two important books, The Game of Life (2001), by Mellon Foundation president William Bowen and James Shulman, and Reclaiming the Game (2003), by Bowen and Sarah Levin, recently brought to light the growing divide between intercollegiate athletics and stated institutional missions. These books are based on comprehensive longitudinal data collected from selective and highly selective institutions. Specifically, Reclaiming the Game is based on data gathered from 33 institutions, including all eight Ivy League members,
which compete at the Division I-AA level, and the follow-
ing Division III institutions: the 11 members of the New
England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC),
four research universities from the University Athletic
Association (UAA), three women’s colleges, and seven
coeducational liberal arts colleges located throughout the
United States.

Key findings include the following:

Athletic programs have a far greater impact on the
composition of the student body and arguably the campus
culture at many Division III institutions than at the majority
of Division I universities. While less than 5 percent of
students play sports at most Division I institutions, more
than one in five undergraduates participate at numerous
Division III colleges. Some Division III institutions report
athletic participation rates of more than 40 percent.

Recruited athletes—defined as those applicants who
are specially recommended to the admissions office by
coaches—enjoy a significant admissions advantage when
compared to nonathletes. For example, nearly seven out of
10 recruited athletes in NESCAC institutions were admitted,
compared to only three out of 10 nonathlete applicants. In
some Division III sports, very few nonrecruited athletes are
able to make the team. This increased emphasis on athletic recruiting has led
some observers to note that rather than sponsor
athletic programs for students, some colleges
simply select athletes for their sports teams.

Many recruited athletes underperform academically. That is, they earn lower grades than they are predicted to
earn based on their standardized test scores and high
school grade point averages.

There is evidence of a separate athletic culture. Ath-
etes tend to be concentrated in the social science and business
fields of study, to not be involved in co- or
extracurricular activities outside their sport, and to live
with and spend most of their time with other athletes.

The College Sports Project

These findings and others led to the founding in mid-2003
of the College Sports Project (CSP), an initiative sponsored
by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The CSP is led by a
seven-member coordinating committee comprised of current
and former college presidents and athletic directors,
including myself. Our ultimate goal is to strengthen the
educational value of the intercollegiate athletic experience
for as many students as possible.

The group’s first task was to identify the primary caus-
es of the divide between athletics and academics at Division
III institutions. After meeting formally and informally with
hundreds of representatives of various constituencies, sev-
ceral causal factors became clear, including (1) the dramatic
increase over the past 10–15 years in the time Division III
athletes spend on their sports (often more than 25–30
hours per week); (2) the increased pressure on coaches to
win, which may be transferred to students in potentially
negative ways; (3) the ever-increasing intensity and special-
ization in sports at the precollegiate level and the effect of
this development on expectations of the college athletic
experience; and (4) the greater significance of Division III
national championships, relegating conference-level com-
petition to little more than stepping-stones to nationals.

A number of costs are inherent in the Division III model
described above. Perhaps most insidious are the following:

At more academically selective institutions, qualified
and uniquely motivated students are denied admission
because coveted slots have been claimed by highly recruited
athletes who, in many cases, are far less likely to take advan-
tage of the special educational opportunities afforded them.

By placing an undue overemphasis on athletics, col-
leges send a message to secondary school students and
their parents that excellence in sports—as opposed to
excellence in academics—is the key to college admission
and financial assistance.

The athletic “arms race”—once thought to be an
exclusively Division I phenomenon—has led to increased
spending, whether for facilities, staffing, or operational
expenses. An increasing number of Division III institutions
are demonstrating a “keeping up with the Joneses” way of
doing business, directing limited resources away from
more academically oriented initiatives.

History teaches us that if left unchecked, the nature
and associated demands of Division III athletics will
become all-consuming. Evidence of this phenomenon is
present at virtually every level of sport in American society,
from Little League baseball and peewee football through highly commercialized Division I-A athletics.

The CSP coordinating committee set out to develop a reform agenda based on core principles and practices. Our thinking was that some set of Division III institutions might choose to embrace that reform agenda while maintaining their involvement in the prevailing NCAA structure. At the 2003 NCAA convention, hundreds of Division III delegates formally considered the future of their division, from both philosophical and practical angles. The dialogue yielded little consensus; rather, it further highlighted the split within the division regarding the rules, regulations, and principles that the membership should be asked to live by. Nevertheless, a legislative “reform package” was put forth to be voted on at the 2004 NCAA convention (in NCAA Division III, each member institution has one vote at the convention on proposed legislation).

Division III is a grouping of 419 institutions that are extraordinarily diverse in terms of enrollment, selectivity, financial aid policies, and budgetary support for athletics. This diversity is not only reflective of the division as a whole; a good deal of variance also exists within conferences, which typically are formed in no small part based on the geographic proximity of member institutions.

Perhaps, then, it should be no surprise that the voting at the 2004 NCAA convention served once again to underscore the variations across the Division III membership rather than to institute meaningful reforms that would more closely align Division III athletics with educational values. It also became clear that modest legislative adjustments (such as more closely monitoring financial aid and eliminating redshirting) that simply tweak the system would not bring about substantive change.

Following the 2004 NCAA convention, the CSP coordinating committee polled 230 Division III college presidents—the great majority of whom had displayed earlier interest or who had supported important elements of the convention’s reform agenda—in an effort to gauge interest in continuing down the road to more meaningful reform. We were encouraged to receive positive replies from over 130 presidents, and set about the task of identifying shared objectives. The committee concluded that the dual initiatives of the measurement of athletes’ representativeness of the rest of the student body and the integration of athletic directors and coaches into the campus educational community could possibly—in tandem—lead to the kinds of positive outcomes we seek.

Representativeness
What does the term “representativeness” mean, and how might it be applied toward an improved Division III sports model? 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. While it is important for institutions to closely monitor their practices in recruiting and admitting athletes, one could argue that what happens to students after they begin their college careers is even more critical. These outcomes will, of course, be largely dependent upon both students’ incoming credentials and the environment and experiences students are exposed to throughout their undergraduate years. The key to the measurement of representativeness lies in the concern for educational outcomes that are primarily, but not exclusively, academic in nature.

Integration
The integration initiative might best be defined as an intentional effort to encourage the athletic, academic, and student life dimensions of colleges and universities to work jointly in attempting to align athletic programs with educational missions. This integration of college sports into the life of the academy must be embraced as a two-way street; faculty, academic administrators, and student life personnel must become more knowledgeable about the important and many times positive role that athletics can play on Division III campuses. The CSP is suggesting a variety of educational initiatives such as integration institutes, campus consultative visiting teams, and departmental reorganization and reprioritization models that, if appropriately applied, will help distinguish Division III athletic programs from models that place winning above other educational objectives.

At this stage, the CSP is benefiting from the important contributions of two working groups (comprised of college presidents, chief academic officers, athletic directors, and faculty) charged with fine-tuning the representativeness and integration initiatives. With regard to representativeness, our current thinking is that institutional members would be expected to share data on all students’ academic achievement levels at the time of admission and then again at the end of four years, with an independent center assuming responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and reporting findings (while maintaining utmost confidentiality). On the integration side, members would be expected
to (1) conduct periodic self-studies followed by external consultation team visits and (2) send groups of senior officers, athletic administrators, coaches, and faculty to integration institutes. These activities would be scheduled on a four-year staggered cycle so that an institution would be actively engaged in one or the other process every two years.

Conclusion

The time is right to bring about a cultural shift that affirms the primacy of educational values over on-field success. This does not mean that winning should not be pursued with vigor and as a noble goal, but that it should be pursued only within the context of educational missions. Time and again we have seen that a focus on change through legislation will not move the college sports machine in a more educationally enhancing direction, and surely a vote for the status quo is an endorsement of further expansion of the divide between athletics and academics. Given the crossroads at which Division III finds itself today, a commitment on the part of all parties—trustees, presidents, faculty, athletic directors, and coaches—to the implementation of the College Sports Project’s representativeness and integration initiatives offers our best opportunity for consequential and enduring reform.

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