

Afterword: Faculty Role in College Sports Oversight

a CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

Our guest author follows up with an afterword on the aftermath of the Knight Commission's Faculty Summit

By Frank G. Splitt

MY COMMENT on Elia Powers' *Inside Higher Ed* article and the Knight Commission Faculty Summit evoked several personal communications from attendees and non-attendees as well. [1]

The following excerpts from these communications tell a sad story:

- "The Summit was worse than a disappointment. It was a travesty, a joke, an embarrassment. Yet it was not a surprise. The Summit captured on one large canvas why reform of college athletics has failed: Avoidance rather than searching; evading rather than facing; posturing rather than confronting."
- "It was difficult to get excited about the Knight Commission Faculty Summit. The general feeling I carried away with me was that the vast majority of faculty, most of whom were not represented at the Summit, have simply resigned themselves to the reality of big-time college sports and have thrown in the towel."
- "My sense was that the discussion was the correct one, but the big problem is that the audience was not the right people – we need to be talking to Presidents/Chancellors and Governing Boards. They are the ones who wield the real power to make changes. I wouldn't want to wait to see faculty "hold their ground," because I doubt that will ever occur. They will just lock themselves in their offices."
- "The general opinion of those present was that faculty should make academic compromises to accommodate the needs of the industry rather than vice versa. An AP writer captured the tone of the meeting in an article entitled Knight Commission Survey finds Professors Ambivalent" [2].
- "We have a tool which can return the balance of power to the faculty. That tool is disclosure.....disclosing the grades of athletes, the courses they take, and the faculty who teach the courses. Efforts to reform college sports and restore academic integrity will continue to fail if we focus on those things that we have no control over as faculty: tax exempt status, coaches' salaries, commercialism, Title IX, arms race, and so forth. We must engage our faculty in the one area that we control: our curriculum and whether or not it truly educates athletes in our respective institutions of higher learning.

NO DOUBT, critical remarks and suggestions by faculty members fell on deaf ears at the Summit. From what I understand, University of Michigan Regent and Knight Commissioner Andrea Fisher Newman, claimed (in effect) that Michigan has absolutely clean academic skirts – notwithstanding claims to the contrary by Stanford University Head Coach and former Michigan quarterback Jim Harbaugh. In the end, what appeared to be missing was a Summit-closing rendition by the Knight Commissioners of "Hakuna Matata" (not to worry/ no problem here).

All of this prompts a reiteration of my firm conviction that, aside from federal intervention, there is no way that university and college presidents, governing boards, and/or faculty members can be motivated to do whatever is necessary to eliminate academic corruption in college sports. Put another way, these parties cannot be educated and/or embarrassed to do the right thing, no matter how logical it seems to be. It's a matter of choice based on their personal circumstances and worldview. More simply put, they want to keep their jobs.

Here it is worth repeating the candid words of John V. Lombardi, the recently appointed president of the Louisiana State University System:

Mega college athletics is indeed a remarkable American invention, it reflects the decisions of academic administrators and governing boards at almost all colleges and universities for over a century. It prospers because for the most part we (our faculty, our staff, our alumni, our legislators, our trustees, our students, and our many other constituencies) want it. We could easily change it, IF MOST OF US WANTED TO CHANGE IT. All protestations to the contrary, we, the colleges and universities of America and our friends and supporters, do not want to change it. What we really want is to imitate the best (often the most expensive) programs in America by winning games and championships . [3]

It has now been two years since it was claimed that big-time (NCAA Div I-A) university and college presidents cannot advocate true reform without risking termination – cultivated by a storm of protest about fiscal irresponsibility and assorted emotional arguments by trustees/regents, boosters, alumni, and rabid fans. [4]

Governing boards, especially those that serve at the pleasure of the president, do what the president wants done. Many boards are driven by wealthy boosters and the president does what they want done. Booster money buys power, influence, and prestige, with tax benefits besides.

As for faculty members, untenured faculty are too busy getting tenure to work for reform and would not want to risk their gaining tenure by bucking the system, while tenured faculty are usually too busy doing research and/or just don't want to get involved in controversial nonacademic affairs.

A book could be written on why it is so difficult to change the status quo in college sports with a chapter dedicated to each of the parties – including the NCAA. It could be prefaced with the above quote from John Lombardi and these words from Murray Sperber, professor emeritus of English and American studies at Indiana University at Bloomington and author of four books on college sports and college life:

I realized that no matter what critics say, no matter how logical our arguments, the 85,000 Texas fans are not going to disappear, nor will the close to 110,000 fans who fill the Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, nor will the millions of other fans at other universities across the country. Thus, to reform intercollegiate athletics, critics will have to understand the power that it has over its fans — a significant percentage of the U.S. population — and how deep its roots are in the American psyche. [5]

And Sperber didn't even mention the big money machines at Ohio State, Penn State, the University of Oregon, Louisiana State University, and the University of Florida. [6-9] These and other universities across the country help generate billions of dollars in revenues not only for the flourishing college sports entertainment business, but for related businesses (such as apparel and video merchandising) as well. Yet to be scrutinized by the Congress and the IRS are the enormous revenue streams from these taxpayer subsidized businesses.

The big-time college sports entertainment business has exploited the American public's addiction to professional college football and men's basketball – creating money machines that are warping the academic mission and values of America's institutions of higher education while compromising their integrity along the way.

Enhanced transparency and accountability are the keys to reclaiming academic primacy in higher education, but just how can this be brought about? We of The Drake Group believe that federal intervention seems to be the only viable course of action, using the continuation of the tax-exempt status of the NCAA and its member institutions as the mechanism.

As previously concluded, the last thing the NCAA, the Knight Commission, and school officials, want to hear about is a congressional hearing on transparency and accountability aimed at making the college sports business prove that it deserves its tax exempt status because such a hearing would likely expose institutional misbehavior via disclosure of the grades of athletes, the courses they take, and the faculty who teach the courses. It is this institutional misbehavior that enables the NCAA to continue its 'student-athlete' ruse – a fraud perpetrated on American taxpayers.

Without federal intervention, the mess in big-time college sports will only grow worse as the schools adopt counter measures to foil or circumvent the NCAA's pathetically weak reform and enforcement measures and as the Knight Commission continues to work with the NCAA – providing it with cover while both the Commission and the NCAA dance far from the edges of serious reform.

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NOTES

1. Powers, Elia, "Assessing the Faculty Role in Sports Oversight," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 16, 2007, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/16/knight>. My comment, "On the Faculty Role in College Sports Oversight," was posted at this URL on October 17 as well as at http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Faculty_Role_in_College_Sports_Oversight.pdf. "An Afterword" posted at the Inside Higher Ed URL on October 21, formed the basis for this commentary.

2. White, Joseph, "Knight Commission survey: Professors ambivalent about effort to control college sports," *Associated Press Sports*, October 15, 2007, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21311259/

3. Lombardi, John V., "Taxing the Sports Factory," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 1, 2007, www.insidehighered.com/views/blogs/reality_check/taxing_the_sports_factory

4. Splitt, Frank G., "Who Wants to Tackle Biggest Man on Campus," Letter to the Editor, *The Wall street Journal*, p. A2, October 5, 2005. See p.28 of "ESSAYS & COMMENTARIES ON COLLEGE SPORTS REFORM October 2004 - October 2005," at http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Essays.pdf

5. Sperber, Murray, "On Being a Fan," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Volume 54, Issue 6, Section: *The Chronicle Review*, Page B5, October 5, 2007.

6. Weinbach, Jon, "Inside College Sports' Biggest Money Machine," *The Wall street Journal*, p. W1, October 19, 2007.

7. Fitzpatrick, Frank, "Raising funds-and eyebrows," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 14, 2007.

8. Powers, Elia, "When Big Bucks Come for Sports," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 17, 2007, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/10/17/oregon>.

9. A set of four articles, under the front-page headline, "Big Money, Big Influence in Sports," appeared in the October 26, 2007, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The articles were as follows: Fain, Paul, "Oregon Debates Role of Big Sports Donors," p. A38, Wolverton, Brad, "Where is the Money Going," p. A39, "As Athletics Donations Go Up, Some Leaders Fret Over Booster Interference," p. A40, and "For Small Programs, Fund Raising Can Be a Ticket to the Big Time," p. A41.