

A CollegeAthleticsClips.Com Guest Commentary – There seems to have been some shenanigans going on in the untimely and unceremonious dismissal of Drake Group member Frank Splitt from his title as Faculty Fellow at Northwestern University. Mr. Splitt takes up his own defense in asking a series of probing questions about the motivations and timing of the removal of his title.

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A Statement on Academic Retaliation

From the Clips Editor: The Drake Group's 23 October 05, press release concerning apparent retaliation by Northwestern University against Dr. Frank Splitt, was posted 24 October 05 on Clips. In response to my inquiry about the release, Mr. Chuck Loebbaka, Director of Media Relations, provided me with the following statement from the university:

"The title "Faculty Fellow" was held uniquely at Northwestern by Splitt. No one else in the entire University is so labeled. Though the title implied a kind of faculty status, "Faculty Fellow" was not an established faculty rank or position; and appointment as "Faculty Fellow" did not include review as is customary when academic appointments are made. The title was created and assigned to Splitt by a former dean of Engineering, without consultation with the Provost. The engineering school has been informed that the rank/position "Faculty Fellow" does not exist at the University and that individuals should not so identify themselves."

I asked Mr. Loebbaka: What was the justification for this action and why now after 12 years? – only to be referred back to the university statement. Since further inquiries produced no replies over the past month, I asked Dr. Splitt if he would be willing to provide Clip's readers with a statement. His statement follows.

By Frank G. Splitt

Preface. The Oct. 23, 2005, press release by The Drake Group, "The Drake Group Concerned Over Apparent Northwestern University Fumble," covered suspected academic retaliation at Northwestern University. The situation can now be summarized as follows: My 1993 appointment as a McCormick Faculty Fellow was summarily invalidated after the publication of "Who wants to tackle biggest man on campus?" in the Oct. 5, issue of *The Wall Street Journal*.

This act of academic retaliation provides a salient example of the stranglehold the college-sports entertainment business has on America's institutions of higher education. This statement shows how this could take place at a prestigious university. It also calls on the media to throw light on the affair and so help The Drake Group, the Alliance for Sports Reform and other reform-minded organizations, in their efforts to restore academic and financial integrity in our institutions of higher learning.

Introduction. Recent columns by Skip Rozin of *The Wall Street Journal* [1] and Selena Roberts of *The New York Times* [2] provide valuable insights and background for this statement. In fact, the opening line of Robert's column can serve as a prelude – helping to set the stage for what follows: "It is worth a take-home exam to discover how the brains behind higher education have lost their minds in the pursuit of football superiority."

Over the years, several members of The Drake Group and the Alliance for Sports Reform have found that, all too often, secrecy, deceit, and deception, are hallmarks of the business of college-

sports entertainment where hypocrisy, intimidation, and retaliation are the tools of the trade. My research and experience, as well as that of my colleagues, indicates that it is a business where ethics, civility, shame, and truth telling are not to be expected [3-7].

Robert's piece and this statement should be read with the knowledge that U Texas Professor Steve Weinberg, the focus of Robert's article, is a 'fire-proof' Nobel Laureate as is U Colorado Professor Carl Wieman, who wrote a scathing Op-ed upon revelation of the scandals that resulted in the 2004 resignation of U Colorado President Elizabeth Hoffman and, coincidentally, occurred during the reign of former NU football coach, Mr. Gary Barnett [8].

As will become evident in the following, the circumstances surrounding this retaliatory action raise a number of deep questions that are of more than casual interest. In fact they provide insights into: how the athletic tail can wag the academic dog, how power and money corrupt and absolute power and big money corrupt absolutely, and how telling the truth about the negative impact of college sports on higher education can have dire consequences – even at NU.

Background. Shortly after my retirement from Northern Telecom as Vice President Emeritus of Educational and Environmental Initiatives, the late Jerome Cohen, then Dean of NU's McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science, invited me to accept an appointment to a special non-tenured, non-salaried, McCormick Faculty Fellow position for a three-year period starting Sept. 1, 1993 – saying he looked forward to welcoming me to the McCormick faculty ranks. This appointment was made with the full knowledge of then President Arnold Weber. Also, it was well publicized, reviewed, and renewed by Dean Cohen and his successor Dean John Birge, with the last renewal extending through Dec. 31, 2005.

Just three days after publication of my letter in *The Wall Street Journal* [9], I received a verbal message from the Dean of the McCormick School. The next message from the Dean came a few days later advising me that he was getting a lot static from the University Media Office and, more importantly, the Provost's Office about my title as McCormick Faculty Fellow. This message triggered the Oct. 23, press release by The Drake Group [10]. Another message from the Dean echoed the statement issued by the NU Media Office, making it clear that I could not use the title "McCormick Faculty Fellow" or identify myself in any way that implies that I am a member of the Northwestern University faculty.

A Question of Meaning. What was the meaning of NU's seemingly ad hoc misrepresentation of my McCormick Faculty Fellow appointment by Dean Cohen? It was apparent that I was being told that the title was illegitimate and therefore meaningless – a preposterous circumstance, leaving the impression that I had been using a title under false premises, casting doubt on my academic credentials, and impugning my reputation in the academic community. To me and many others, this was beyond understanding since, over the years, my name and title appeared in NU faculty-honors publications, in the Congressional Record, in several NU Electrical and Computer Engineering Department newsletters, in prior non-sports-related letters in *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as in numerous professional journals and conference proceedings.

A Question of Motivation. What motivated the Provost to state that the McCormick Faculty Fellow title does not exist at Northwestern University after nearly twelve years of well-documented and unquestioned use? And, why would the Provost take his valuable time to pressure for an immediate invalidation of my appointment under the guise of a contrived rationale? These questions are indeed perplexing since this seemingly urgent action occurred only some two months prior to the terminal date of my last three-year appointment.

Since there was no rational explanation given by NU to justify this radical, punishment-like action, consideration was given to the possibility that it was a vindictive act of retaliation. But how could something so unethical and unprofessional happen at NU? What could motivate the Provost to do such a thing; and, how could the President allow him to do it? The apparent answer is fear ... fear

instilled by an influential power greater than they. But what could motivate someone to use their power to initiate actions resulting in the swift, premature invalidation of my appointment and title?

This question focused attention on the motivation for the action. The Provost would normally have much more important academic affairs to worry about than my athletics-related letter. So, pressure capable of motivating the Provost must have evolved from elsewhere — most likely from fervent sports-booster alumni who have been major contributors to NU's Campaign for Athletic Excellence such as, for example, the chairman of the NU Board of Trustees [11, 12]. Given the evident high priority on gaining football superiority at NU, powerful boosters would not be pleased with what might be perceived as something negative being said about big-time college sports in a widely-read newspaper – least of all from someone affiliated with NU.

A Question of Ethics. Questioning the assumption that a prestigious university such as NU always operates with integrity and in compliance with the highest of ethical standards led to a Department of Justice announcement that NU will pay the US \$5.5 million to settle allegations that it violated the False Claims Act [13] and revelation of unethical conduct in the *Chicago Tribune* story that reported NU was forced to reveal that one of its doctors had burned records in the Rashidi Wheeler wrongful-death case [14].

Summary. The short time between the publication of my letter and the messages from the Dean, coupled with credible motivation and evidence of recent unethical activity, provides convincing circumstantial evidence of a retaliatory act. Other connected 'dots' are:

First, there are few, if any, university administrations that would run the risk of losing the favor and financial support of very wealthy benefactors ... especially benefactors who are also members of their governing board. The wishes of such benefactors are tantamount to commands. Put another way, these benefactors have tremendous 'clout' and can strike an unmistakably clear tone for a university administration.

Second, the evident aim of NU's administration over the past decade has been to move NU higher in the ranks of college sports. The Board of Trustees was well positioned to influence the administration and the chairman's influence was likely powerful enough to create an environment wherein the administration and board came to understand that the NU sports program was a very high priority on his personal agenda and ought to be on theirs as well. The swift retaliatory action is considered to be an example of this understanding – revealing a surprising athletics-over-academics mindset

Third, not a Nobel Laureate and without tenure, my position as a McCormick Faculty Fellow must have been considered expendable and easy to invalidate.

Concluding Remarks. Compelling circumstantial evidence leads me to believe that the NU Provost was 'motivated' to invalidate the McCormick Faculty Fellow position so that it could no longer be used to advocate for disclosure and other reform mechanisms in college sports, especially in widely-read newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal*. In the end, it is not important to know who or what was responsible for motivating the Provost, only that such motivation existed beyond a reasonable doubt.

This affair is haunted by a myriad of questions to which we may never know the answers – unless and until the right questions are asked of the right people. However, my experience suggests that intimidation and fear of retaliation will all but guarantee the silence of present and former NU faculty members, administrators, and others, who were in a position to know about the deceit and deception employed in the retaliation. If asked, all can be expected to follow an 'admit-to-no-knowledge-or-wrongdoing' strategy that has been successfully employed in the corporate world. Nonetheless, the media is still in the best position to ask hard questions. No responses and no comments will speak volumes.

It should be evident from this statement that NU's retaliatory action is a significant event in the history of college-sports reform. However, reporters and their editors may not understand its significance, seeing the premature loss of a title as a trivial incident – a mere loose thread in the fabric of college sports. On the other hand, an attentive press can pull on the thread to unravel a story about the stranglehold the college-sports entertainment business has on America's institutions of higher education.

Finally, the media can throw light on this odious retaliation affair, and by so doing, initiate a breakthrough in college-sports reform – helping The Drake Group and the Alliance for Sports Reform restore academic and financial integrity in our institutions of higher learning. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said: "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants."

Frank Splitt is VP Emeritus of Educational and Environmental Initiatives of Northern Telecom. He was appointed as a McCormick Faculty Fellow position at Northwestern University starting Sept. 1, 1993. Through the years, Mr. Splitt has been a tireless advocate for reviving American excellence in engineering and science higher education. He is also a prominent member of the Drake Group, and has been spoken frequently about the over commercialization of big time college athletics.

This commentary was written exclusively for College Athletics Clips by Frank Splitt.

Ed.-The opinions, assumptions and conclusions presented above are entirely and exclusively those of the author. These are NOT the opinions of College Athletics Clips, and we make no endorsement thereof.

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