

An Unheralded Crisis in Higher Ed

College Athletics Clips Guest Commentary

Our guest author tees off on what he sees as academic missions hijacked by the “professional college sports entertainment industry fueled by an ocean of tax-free money.”

There seems to be only a precious few who care about a crisis in higher ed wherein the academic mission at many schools has been hijacked by the professional college sports entertainment industry that is not only fueled by an ocean of tax-free money and enabled by corruption and cheating, but aided and abetted by all too familiar forms of cronyism and scandalously cozy relationships as well.

By Frank G. Splitt, The Drake Group, May 31, 2010

PROLOGUE – The February 9, 2010, *PBS Frontline Program*, "Flying Cheap," was keyed to the final investigative report on the Buffalo crash of Continental 3407, the deadliest U.S. air accident in eight years.¹ Congressional Investigator Clay Foushee, said: “It is the watershed accident. It's become the symbol of everything that's wrong with the industry.” The investigation focused on a major transformation in the airline industry—exposing the reduced safety margin issue associated with regional air carrier transportation relative to the safety margins of the hub-centered major airlines. In large measure, the reduced safety margins can be attributed to the corruptive influence of unbridled cronyism and the cozy relationships between the operators (the regional carriers) and its governing agency where relationships preempted the oversight mission of the agency—in this case, the U. S. Department of Transportation.

CRISES AND COMMON CAUSES – A repeat broadcast of the "Flying Cheap" program on May 25, 2010, came at the same time network news programs were announcing the frustrations of government officials and the general public with the oil-spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico as well as with America's continuing financial crisis. Only a few weeks before, while attention was focused on debate surrounding the healthcare crisis, the *National Catholic Reporter* carried a front-page story on the founder of the Legion of Christ, a secretive, cult-like religious order now under Vatican investigation, saying: "his life was arguably the darkest chapter in the clergy abuse crisis that continues to plague the church."²

Mounting evidence indicates that all of these disasters and crises appear to have the same root cause as that exposed by the "Flying Cheap" expose—cronyism and the cozy relationships between operators and governing bodies (regulators, official watchdog agencies and surrogates, both official and unofficial). Cronyism and scandalously cozy relationships played major roles in reducing safety margins for offshore oil drilling, the near crash of America's financial system with its related loss of jobs and home foreclosures, and the exorbitant cost of health care, as well as the pedophile cover-up in the Roman Catholic Church.

The general public is justifiably upset with the government's lack of competent oversight and regulation of regional carriers, offshore drilling companies, the healthcare industry, and Wall Street's obscure financial mechanisms. Catholic laity and the vast majority of priests and nuns are not only disgusted with the behavior of the pedophile priests, but also with the initial weak response by the Vatican.

AN UNHERALDED CRISIS – Standing in sharp contrast to the above reactions is the lack of public reaction to the reported cheating and academic corruption scandals at schools supporting big-time football and men's basketball programs, most recently at the University of Michigan, and, for that matter, with the smoldering crisis in America's system of higher education where the

academic mission at many schools has been hijacked by the professional college sports entertainment industry.

Sad to say, the cheating and corruption that enables the NCAA cartel—the NCAA and its member institutions—to field professional teams and have their conferences serve as the minor leagues for the NFL and NBA, are rooted in the same types of cronyism and cozy relationships that have been instrumental in bringing about the headline crises of the day.³ The cartel is a multi-billion dollar juggernaut that has conflicting interests as members serve as promoters of their professional sports businesses and enforcers of rules that can curtail the viability of these businesses. Worse yet, there is no meaningful oversight as the NCAA and its member are not only self-reporting, self-regulating, and self-enforcing, but have also used cozy relationships to co-opt the supposed watchdog Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.⁴

The we-can-do-nothing attitude of the majority of the NCAA cartel's officials—including school presidents—as well as members of Congress and the administration have led to a collective complicity in an unheralded crisis in higher education. Where is the outrage?

A NOTICEABLE LACK OF OUTRAGE – There is certainly no outrage coming from the public that simply loves professional games no matter how corrupt their underpinnings. Also, the public is apparently overwhelmed by present-day disasters and crises with little time and energy to spend worrying about problems and issues that seem in no need of urgent resolution and none of their concern.

Entertainment provides welcome distractions from these mind-numbing disasters and crises. Besides, who cares about long-term consequences so long as the NCAA cartel provides exciting entertainment on par with this past season's popular reality TV shows, *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Idol*?

THE DRAKE GROUP – As evidenced by its two open letters to the president and related follow-ups, members of The Drake Group care have been working to get President Obama and his Administration to care as well.⁵ The Drakes are continuing to keep the U.S. Department of Education as well as with the U.S. Congress aware of related issues and the fact that without transparency, accountability and independent oversight, powerful governing board and wealthy boosters, as well as alumni and rabid fans will continue to have their way with university presidents. Who can resist fame and the ocean of tax-free money?

President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan can learn much from the experiences of Mary Sue Coleman and R. Gerald Turner about the overwhelming forces that are brought to bear on university presidents to field winning teams. See the appended discussion.

FUTURE OUTLOOK – Only time will tell if the government will continue to ignore global realities and stand idly by while letting big-time college sports programs continue to practice as they do today—compromising the educational, economic, and physical well-being of America.

Perhaps it will be the U. S. Department of Justice that will do what politicians are unwilling or unable to do. For example, the March 10, 2010, complaint in Case No. C 09-01967 CW, United States District Court, Northern District of California, Oakland Division, provides a damning criticism of the NCAA and sets the foundation for a class-action lawsuit that could overhaul college sports in America.⁶ A pending lawsuit brought against the NCAA—a merger of two different but related cases are direct attacks on the NCAA's business and the very definition of "amateur."

Hopefully, in years to come America's colleges and universities will not have morphed into wholly-owned subsidiaries of the entertainment industry and President Obama will not have to

say, as he did during the oil-spill crisis: "In case you were wondering who's responsible, I take responsibility." By then it will be too late to make up the all too many years of lost time when the crisis was ignored as the schools engaged in an athletics arms race—characterized by exorbitant spending on stadiums, arenas, and jocks-only academic eligibility and physical training centers—while America's global competitors focused on developing world-class universities and a well educated citizenry.

APPENDIX: No Profiles in Presidential Courage

The following is an excerpt from Bob Gilbert's column for Wednesday, May 26, 2010:

MICHIGAN ADMITS CHEATING – Trying to head off even stiffer penalties by the NCAA, the University of Michigan has admitted a series of violations in its football program and has self-imposed some sanctions.

They include cutting back practice time by 130 hours the next two seasons, banning some staffers from practice, and a two-year probation.

Anonymous Michigan players revealed they were exceeding NCAA limits on practice and training time. The NCAA will be the final judge on punishment.

In 2002, it was clear that Michigan's basketball program was guilty of major violations. Michigan decided to impose its own sanctions on the program that November when Mary Sue Coleman, a recently appointed president, and athletic director Bill Martin announced that the school was imposing sanctions of its own on the basketball program. Coleman described what happened as "wrong, plain and simple." She also said, "I am determined that nothing like this will ever happen again at Michigan."

Some might say it is ironic that a school that has become an example of the blatant hypocrisy surrounding higher education's college sports entertainment businesses and all that's wrong with win-at-any-cost big-time football and men's basketball programs, has a president that has been among the most outspoken of NCAA apologists.

It should come as no surprise that Coleman is a former member of the NCAA's Executive Committee and a trustee of the Knight Foundation—sponsor of the NCAA co-opted Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

For additional insights see Tom Palaima's articles in which he exposes the NCAA tactic of blaming the faculty for the problems with college sports⁷ and uses R. Gerald Turner, the president of Southern Methodist University and Knight Commission co-chair, as a salient example of hypocritical behavior.⁸

NOTES

1. "Flying Cheap," *PBS Frontline*, February 9, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/flyingcheap/>
2. Berry, Jason, "New Maciel revelations: Money paved way for Legion founder's influence at Vatican," *National Catholic Reporter*, April 16, 2010.
3. Whitlock, Jason, "NCAA breeds a culture of corruption," *Kansas City Star*, <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/05/26/1973956/ncaa-breeds-a-culture-of-corruption.html>
4. Splitt, Frank G., "The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics: Why It Needs Fixing," December 2, 2009, http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Knight_Commission.pdf
5. Otto, Kadence and Splitt, Frank G., "The Drake Group's Open Letters to the President and His Administration, March 17, 2009 , <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama.pdf>, and May 27, 2009, <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama2.pdf>
6. Weinbach, Jon, "NCAA Facing Its Own Erin Brockovich" *FanHouse*, May 26, 2010, <http://ncaabasketball.fanhouse.com/2010/05/26/ncaa-facing-its-own-erin-brockovich/>
7. Palaima, Thomas, "NCAA Panel Disses the Faculty," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 27, 2006, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2006/11/27/palaima>
8. _____, "No profiles in courage when it comes to university presidents," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 14, 2010, <http://www.statesman.com/opinion/palaima-no-profiles-in-courage-when-it-comes-689293.html>.