

How Colleges Cope with a Perfect Storm

Among other things, schools must confront sports related academic corruption, sexual abuse and serious drinking problems.

By Frank G. Splitt, 10-03-18

Introduction – Though our nation's sports-and-money driven colleges and universities are still considered to be the envy of the world, this exalted stature raises a vexing question, to wit: How long can these schools be considered the envy of the world when weighted down by sports related academic corruption, sexual abuse and serious drinking problems, not to mention problems with grade inflation, unmotivated/coddled students, over reliance on adjuncts, persistent labeling as leftist, as well as free speech on campuses?¹ The answer will depend on how well school administrators deal with these complex and often interrelated problems.

The Setting – Our nation's academic institutions can now be likened to luxury-cruise ships attempting to stay afloat when encountering a perfect storm—academically adrift in a sea of sports, alcohol and sex abuse. This circumstance is not openly talked about and certainly not addressed in the annual ranking of our nation's colleges by *US News & World Report*. Here's what's going on in this secret battlefield in a sharply divided America.²

On Sports – Back in 2001, some scholars questioned the gloomy picture of higher education outcomes in America painted by the authors of *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.³ My letter to the editor of *The Chronicle* was a response to these doubters.⁴ The letter referenced Murray Sperber's 2000 book, *Beer and Circus*, an exposé that should have led to a reassessment of higher education at the time. Sperber argued that colleges are substituting a party-like, "beer and circus" social environment for a meaningful education—an environment that serves to keep students happy, to marginalize faculty, and to maintain an ongoing flow of evermore tuition dollars.⁵ That's the basis for the luxury-cruise-ship metaphor as well as an insight into the contribution of sports to the perfect storm.

On Sexual Abuse – The extent of the sexual abuse crisis at our nation's colleges and campuses can be seen via a viewing of the *CNN* documentary "The Hunting Ground."⁶ It's an exposé of rape crimes on U.S. college campuses, institutional cover-ups, and the devastating toll they take on students and their families. The documentary focuses on Annie E. Clark and Andrea Pino, two former University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill students who filed a Title IX complaint against UNC in response to their rapes while enrolled. They are now promoting their use of Title IX as a model for campus sexual assault cases at universities across the country.

On Alcohol – Alcohol contributes to the perfect storm as well. According to Robb Jones, senior vice president and general counsel for claims management at United Educators, "Alcohol is linked to violence and injuries on campus, including fights, sexual assault, hazing, slips and falls, and even fatalities. High-risk drinking also takes a financial toll by resulting in student attrition, emergency services, disciplinary actions, counseling services and property damage. One study of college insurance claims found that losses were 25% higher if a claim involved alcohol."⁷

The Cover-up Coping Strategy – Our nation's colleges and universities have responded to problems of sexual abuse and sports- related academic corruption by utilizing the cover-up playbook titled "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" to bamboozle and/or stonewall the media and authorities so as to maintain the "life" of their institutions – looking the other way without regard to human costs and risk to the long-term viability of the entities they are trying to protect.

Real Mitigation Strategies – Commercialized college sports with attendant academic corruption, high-risk drinking, and sexual abuse among college students are complex problems with no easy solutions. Mitigating these problems requires a coordinated effort from all leadership at the schools. Insurance and risk management are a crucial part of that approach. So too would be the school's trustees, but therein lies still another problem.

It is ironic that trustees, who have the duty as well as the ultimate authority to ensure that all of their institutions programs are conducted ethically and responsibly, can be faulted for some of the problems in higher education. Unfortunately, many institutions offer no training for new board members. Apparently, most current trustees were selected with a view toward their ability to make substantial financial donations, provide political influence, and certainly not of a nature to make waves by interfering with academic and/or athletic operations.

Thus, for the most part, trustees stay behind the mask of institutional maintenance – fiduciary guardians and protectors of their school's reputation as well as its optics—embracing the cover-up play book as applied to campus sexual assaults as well as the loss of academic integrity at schools that strive to win at any cost. Recent examples can be found at Michigan State and Ohio State Universities.⁸

A first order of business for school administrators that want to make a serious effort to mitigate their school's problems would be to recognize that the school's students and their parents, as well as its faculty deserve leadership that listens, responds, and acts decisively, openly, and quickly to bring about real transparency, accountability, and genuine reform.

Next, would be the education of new trustees so they know that they are to serve as stewards of the professed (as-advertised) mission and values of their institution as well as work to foster its long-term viability. In his related commentary, "It's Time for College Trustees to Get in the Game," Richard Chait goes so far as to say: "A respectable board would forensically investigate scandals retroactively and discipline perpetrators. The very best boards will act preventively."⁹

Educational Resources – To better understand what should be expected of them, trustees should become members of ACTA, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, that is committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities.¹⁰

Trustees could also profit from giving thoughtful consideration to the work of The Drake Group that has as its mission the defense of academic integrity in higher education from the corrosive aspects of commercialized college sports.¹¹ Recently, The Drake Group challenged the recommendations of the Rice Commission that left the NCAA off the hook with the absence of

recommendations that would break the NCAA's stranglehold on its member institutions. Also see the Arne Duncan and Carol Cartwright commentary, "The NCAA Is Too Far Gone for Incremental Reform."¹²

Furthermore, trustees should look to the work of The National Coalition Against Violent Athletes (NCAVA) that is dedicated to empowering individuals affected by athlete violence through comprehensive services including advocacy, legal aid, education and counseling and also works to eliminate off-the-field violence by athletes.¹³ Trustee visits to the End Rape on Campus (EROC) website would be a learning experience—revealing additional resources.¹⁴

Outlook for the Future – The aforementioned educational resources will likely go unused since most, if not all, school administrators are comfortable with the status quo because they apparently believe that alcohol and sexual abuse as well as sports-related academic corruption are simply the costs of doing business in the extremely competitive higher-education marketplace. Therefore, it would seem that coercion via government intervention is required, as painful and seemingly draconian as that may be.

Needless to say, mandated action by the government is highly unlikely in today's political climate. A much better way to navigate the treacherous waters in higher education would be for school presidents to take corrective action on their own. They could do this by exploiting all available resources to upgrade and educate their trustees before unleashing them to provide transformational leadership for institution-wide corrective action.

Is it likely that this will happen? Don't bet on it. Sad to say, America's institutions of higher education will probably muddle on as they have successfully done in the past by using their fixers, lawyers, and enormous power – both political and financial – to deal with Title IX-based lawsuits and other legal challenges brought forth by students, parents, and concerned citizens..

Concluding Remarks – Muddle on, perhaps that's the best that can be expected from institutions fraught with human frailties that operate in a divided nation where its citizens are seemingly addicted to sports entertainment and gambling—prioritizing athletics over academics. Nonetheless, critics should not despair, but rather keep up their courageous fight to provide the sunshine that illuminates the very dark corners of the battlefield.

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NOTES

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Frank G. Splitt, a former McCormick Faculty Fellow at Northwestern University's McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science, was the recipient of The Drake Group's 2006 Robert Maynard Hutchins Award, and is the author of the 2015 book *An Odyssey of Reform Initiatives, 1986-2015: From Engineering, K-12 and Higher Education to the Environment, National Information Infrastructure, and Collegiate Athletics*. The book can be accessed at www.futurevectors.com

Future Vectors, Inc.
Mount Prospect, Illinois