



The Drake Group, INC.
ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN COLLEGIATE SPORT

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Eyes of Texas is a “Yes, Coach” Moment

New Haven CONN:

Black football players at the University of Texas at Austin [requested the institution make changes](#) following the killing of George Floyd and nationwide protests for racial equity and police reform during the summer months. Consistent with statements calling for justice and equity by college athletes all over the United States, the Black football players at UT requested that the University no longer compel the football team to sing “The Eyes of Texas” after every game. It is a long-standing post-game tradition that athletes gather on the field, with the fans joining in the stands, to raise their arms with the “Hook ‘em Horns” hand sign and enthusiastically sing the song.

The UT athletes argued that the lyrics, while perhaps on their face to some are innocuous and benign, are deeply racist to them. They point out that the song’s use in minstrel shows associates the song with racism. The UT football players, supported by allies both on and off campus such as the UT marching band, made it clear that this post-game ritual of singing “The Eyes of Texas” is offensive and degrading to them and their Black peers at the institution. The University refused to require that the song no longer be sung after every football game. Following public outcry about that decision, the school appointed a special history committee to examine the issue, including the origins of the song, and submit a report to the University.

During this review, on March 2, the president of the University of Texas [released a statement](#) that generically condemned racism in all of its forms. The next week, the University released the [history committee’s report](#) on the school song, “The Eyes of Texas.” This well-researched report further contextualized the history of the song, pointing out historically progressive as well as racist uses of the song. The president affirms, as the report recommends, that athletes will not be forced to participate in any ritual singing of the song.

The first question to ask about the report is its timing with respect to the University’s decision to continue having the song remain as the school’s alma

mater. Because that decision was reached before the history committee's report was submitted, the president and regents can hardly claim that it represents the University's dedication to research as an avenue to the truth. The conclusion was predetermined from the outset. No matter what the report said, the die was cast, and no evidence running counter to the preferred outcome was going to make any difference. Is this any way for a university to exemplify its dedication to academic freedom and respect for knowledge?

The Drake Group believes the decision is not only insensitive but symbolic of misuses of power and the corruptible influence of highly commercialized collegiate sports that have enabled continued exploitation of Black athletes, particularly in the revenue sports of men's football and basketball in which they are majority participants. Our comments are therefore not limited to UT Austin. Rather, we intend broader application and urge public and higher education reflection on this example.

First, the public should be made aware, as UT Austin fully knows, that athletes, like all students and employees at public institutions have First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and expression. No individual should be forced by a public institution to express a message that violates their convictions. Compelling the football team to sing a school song that they find racist places an undue burden on the players' First Amendment rights. Simply, the government, including state schools, do not have a right to tell athletes what to believe or to tell athletes what they must say (or sing) or not say about their beliefs. They cannot be forced to deliver a message that is antithetical to their beliefs. In short, the University knows better and should not for a minute think that by ingenuously giving a permission already granted by the Constitution, they have alleviated the athletes' discomfort. Further, they knowingly enable another uncomfortable circumstance where athletes express their convictions by either standing in silence while many coaches and fans do sing it or leaving the field.

While the debate about the origins and history of The Eyes of Texas is important, The Drake Group believes it detracts from other points, which should be elevated as primary and current concerns. First, there needs to be a focus on the way athletic departments control athletes, especially in the most prominent revenue sports of Division I football and basketball, in which players are predominantly Black. Power is wielded in debilitating ways. Athletes are fearful that any questioning of the decisions or treatment by the coach will be met with punishment from the loss of a scholarship, to the loss of a starting position, to the withdrawal of instruction and coach attention. "Yes Coach" is the only acceptable stance. Purposefully, we reflect on the blind obedience all too commonly required in the athletics culture and its similarity to our embarrassing history of slave ownership and the expected behavior of slaves. And purposefully, we do not "tip toe" in our use of the analogy.

UT Austin demonstrates this point with startling clarity with the recent coaching change in the UT football program. Fired coach Tom Herman appeared to side with his players during the fall 2020 season, allowing the players to decide whether or not to participate in the "Eyes" ritual. This controversial public support of Black players was no doubt a factor in the decision — along with a less than stellar record, especially against rival University of Oklahoma — to fire the coach, made by the athletic director. It is also possibly true that AD Del Conte, when replacing Herman, made it a point to hire someone who was comfortable demanding that players participate in the "Eyes" ritual. At the moment of the hiring of the new

white head coach, Steve Sarkisian, it was made immediately clear that all players would be required to participate in the post-game “Eyes” ritual. Among Sarkisian’s first statements as coach was the declaration that his players had no choice but to comply with this demand, stating “we’re going to sing that song, proudly.” So much for the First Amendment.

Second, not only is our society working to overcome this history of racism generally but also higher education is slowly working its way out of its history of racial inequity, especially in our most selective and highly resourced colleges and universities. Despite a stunning change in the ethnic/racial composition of students attending American higher education institutions – from 84% White/Non-Hispanic in 1976 to 55% White/Non-Hispanic in 2018, faculty and athletic department staff diversity has not followed suit. Data for 2018 shows that 75% of full-time faculty, 85% of athletic directors, and 85% of head coaches are White/Non-Hispanic. This decision making culture has a different impact on white versus Black students, often denying the latter the same education and supportive environment of their white counterparts. When you combine the “Yes Coach” power differential with the well-documented questionable academic practices of many athletic programs, the result is that too many Black athletes are not receiving meaningful degrees or are receiving no degrees at all. It is simply unrealistic to expect that Black athletes can object to their placement in less challenging classes and majors or express concern that predominantly white coaches and academic counselors continue to make stereotypical assumptions of their intellectual ability. And, if Black athletes express their deeply held beliefs that being expected to sing “The Eyes of Texas” is offensive and degrading (to not only Black players but to Black students generally), do we really expect them to stand up to power when the institution works so hard to ignore their request?

Third, the UT Austin lesson brings to the forefront the blind obedience required by alumni of wealth from leaders of the institution. [*The Texas Tribune*](#) uncovered a trove of documents in which wealthy alumni and boosters indicate that should the institution give in to Black athletes’ anti-racist demands, the boosters would cut off the money that the institution and its athletic department have come to rely on. The fear that prevents the UT president and the athletic director from standing up to the power of major donors is clearly understood by athletes and coaches. Their absence of courage should be understood but not condoned. Decisions on the conduct of athletic programs advance alumni interests in winning while often being contrary to athletes’ interest in their own education and mental and physical health. Athletes routinely spend 40 to 50 hours per week meeting the demands of coaches and their sports. The NCAA and its member institutions hide behind the purposeful misrepresentation of its “20 hour per week of athletics related activities” while creating graduation metrics that hide the true graduation rates of athletes in revenue producing sports and the even lower rates of Black athletes as a subset among those. (Black basketball and football players graduate at 37% and 22% lower, respectfully, than the undergraduate population. Less than 3% of these athletes go on to have a professional sports career.) And, as demonstrated by the ultimatum of wealthy donors, they expect to control college sport – and to continue the minstrel show, this time openly performed by Black athletes rather than whites in blackface.

Last, the larger issue here is athletes’ rights, with race at the center. A group of powerful and wealthy donors used that wealth and power to demand that the institution, the athletic director, and the coaches be complicit in controlling the actions of Black athletes. Forcing these Black athletes to participate in this ritual –

despite the stated athletes' feelings about such participation being offensive and degrading becomes unconscionable – especially during this time in our history. Thus, the debate is less about the racist origins, intentions, or even impact of “The Eyes of Texas” and the postgame ritual. The concern is wealthy White boosters controlling the actions, and even people’s perceptions, of Black athletes while educational leaders turn a blind eye to their failure to deliver a meaningful education and a safe and supportive environment to all students – including Black athletes.

As demonstrated by recent moments at the University of Missouri and the University of Mississippi, college athletes – specifically Black college football players – possess the social power to impact institutional, local, and state policy. We are confident that the Longhorn football players and other athletes, should they choose to do so, have the capacity to speak loudly in the face of this “yes, Coach” moment.

The Drake Group recommends that the NCAA and its member institutions identify and develop initiatives that cultivate the growth of students’ voices and empowerment. We also recommend increasing collaborative efforts to sustain athletes’ social justice work on campus and in communities surrounding campuses by investing monetarily in these efforts. We further recommend developing transparent ways to involve athletes in the processes involved in hiring coaches. Lastly, we recommend that institutions cut ties with boosters who support racism and racist traditions.

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The Drake Group is a national organization of faculty and others whose mission is to defend educational integrity in higher education from the corrosive aspects of commercialized college sports.
