

The brutal truth about college sports: Who will tell the president?

By Frank G. Splitt

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Preface – The Drake Group’s Open Letter to the President and His Administration¹ was delivered to the White House the same day, Wednesday, March 18, 2009, that Doug Lederman reported on Florida State’s fight against charges of academic corruption² and President Obama announced his ‘final-four’ picks for the NCAA’s *March Madness* Basketball Tournament.³ Taken together these three events reveal a troubling story—headlined telling the brutal truth about college sports.⁴

The Open Letter – The open letter to the president addressed the challenge to get academics-over-athletics priorities re-established at America’s colleges and universities that are held captive to the NCAA’s commercial interests⁵—asking for assistance from the executive branch of government to see that compliance to federal requirements for the NCAA’s tax exemptions are enforced.

The letter stated that The Drake Group believes it is time to address the government’s subsidization of the NCAA—to hold the NCAA accountable for the substantial financial support it receives from America’s taxpayers and to halt the NCAA’s misuse and abuse of federal tax policies. It also stated that the Group believes reform is highly unlikely without government action—implying that the tax issue is the NCAA’s Achilles heel.

Secretary Arne Duncan, U.S. Department of Education, received a copy of the related press release—along with additional background and reference material—as did Senator Charles Grassley, the past Chair and now Ranking Republican Member of the Senate Finance Committee, and several other members of Congress.

The Lederman Report – The Lederman report prompted a number of comments⁶ related to the corruption at America’s colleges and universities supporting big-time football and basketball programs. Most members of Congress likely hope nobody will pay attention to this corruption and the related erosion of academic integrity, as well as notice their long-time failure to oversee the NCAA cartel as it worked over the years to professionalize big-time football and men’s basketball programs.

Sportswriters are no doubt as conflicted as members of Congress when it comes to exposing the NCAA as it continues to employ secrecy and disingenuousness as it resists the establishment of meaningful measures of transparency, accountability, and oversight. The simple act of asking the NCAA and/or its member schools to tell the truth about their operations could risk job security.

The President’s White House Pick ‘em – The picks were made at a White House event orchestrated by ESPN and accompanied by a great deal of hoopla and national evening news coverage. *March Madness* provides a good case in point for the real madness and greed associated with the NCAA’s tournament that is now in full swing. To get an overall sense of “what’s going on,” see the related stories.⁷⁻¹¹

It is indeed troubling to think that the vision of our athletics-minded president has been colored by a combination of his love of the game, NCAA PR, and the excitement of this manifestation of the American public's sports' mania. Apparently he does not seem to realize that the higher a team's ranking for the NCAA's *March Madness* Basketball Tournament, the more likely it is that team members were recruited and kept eligible by corruption—egregious, secretive cheating of one sort or another. Like cream, the very best cheaters rise to the top. The same applies to team rankings for BCS football bowl games.

Concluding Remarks – Notwithstanding the Open Letter to the President, many reform-minded academics are left to wonder if President Obama would be open to learning the brutal truth about the widespread, greed-driven corruption in the NCAA's college sports entertainment businesses—even though the corruption correlates closely with the root cause of many of the problems he is confronting in other sectors of the business community

Perhaps it will be up to Education Secretary Duncan to reveal the truth to the president—counseling him by saying: If America is going to continue to maintain a position of leadership on the 21st century's world stage, then it not only needs to invest in its institutions of higher education to ensure our nation's continued competitiveness and security, but it also needs to get its educational priorities right—restoring academics-over-athletics primacy to higher education.

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NOTES

1. Otto, Kadence and Frank G. Splitt (on behalf of The Drake Group), "Open Letter to the President and His Administration," Press Release, March 18, 2009, <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama.pdf>.
2. Lederman, Doug, "'Florida State's Unpleasant Vacation," *InsideHigherEd.com*, March 18, 2009, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/03/18/vacation>. This essay is based on my March 21, comment on Lederman's report and communications with the Dept. of Education as well as members of Congress and their staffs.
3. Katz, Andy, "Presidential pick 'em at the White House," *ESPN.com*, March 18, 2009, http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/ncaatourney09/columns/story?columnist=katz_andy&id=3991859
4. For context see Skip Rozin's, Sept. 15, 2005, *Wall Street Journal* column , "The Brutal Truth About College Sports," and my related Oct. 5, 2005, letter, "Who Wants to Tackle Biggest Man on Campus?."
5. Many of our nation's top research universities have drifted from their educational mission and instead, have allowed big-time college sports to operate as unrelated businesses rather than an integral part of higher education.
6. Comments can be accessed at <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/03/18/vacation#Comments>
7. Sherman, Elizabeth, "An Open Secret," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2009, <http://views.washingtonpost.com/leadership/panelists/2009/03/an-open-secret.html>
8. Jackson, Derrick Z., "Foul play on black athletes' graduation rates" *The Boston Globe*, March 17, 2009, http://www.boston.com/sports/colleges/mens_basketball/articles/2009/03/17/foul_play_on_black_athletes_graduation_rates/.
9. Erbe, Bonnie, and Thomas Jefferson Street blog, "The Real March Madness: America's Obsession with Sports Harms Women, Society," USNEWS.com, March 18, 2009, <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/erbe/2009/03/18/the-real-march-madness-americas-obsession-with-sports-harms-women-society.html>
10. The Editors, "March Money Madness," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2009, <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/18/march-money-madness/>. This piece provides pro-and-con insights from: Allen Sack, Bill Walton, Ellen J. Staurowsky, Stephen Danley, Andrew Zimbalist, Murray Sperber, and William C. Dowling.
11. Vedder, Richard and Denhart, Matthew, "The Real March Madness," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123751289953291279.html>.