

Easing Athletes' Academic Path: A Step Down a Slippery Slope?

by Frank G. Splitt

As reported by Doug Lederman in “Easing Athletes’ Academic Path,”¹ a faculty report urges the University of Minnesota to let more athletes into sports-themed majors, raising questions about potential for lowered standards. This approach is in sharp contrast to that taken by Minnesota’s Hibbing Community College that announced it was indefinitely suspending its football program — acting on concern that most of its football players were not academically on par with other students. See “When Football Numbers Don’t Add Up.”²

What’s next in the vast array of tactics used by schools to compete at the highest levels of big-time college sports?

Leading the way in this latest workaround, is a school tarnished by a well known men’s basketball scandal in the late 1990s in which sports officials engaged in academic fraud to try to help athletes stay eligible to compete.

Ostensibly, this tactic is aimed at easing compliance with NCAA rules that threaten penalties, including the loss of scholarships, against Division I colleges that fail to keep a significant proportion of their athletes on track to graduation. This may very well be, even though the new NCAA rules can be easily foiled, see Murray Sperber’s “Myles to go at the NCAA.”³

However, notwithstanding university officials insistence that they have no intention of lowering academic standards to accommodate athletes, the bottom line is that the move represents a thinly veiled attempt to recruit and maintain the eligibility of at-risk (academically unqualified) athletes by expanding the definition of what is meant by academics — to do whatever it takes to field winning teams. Eventually, this approach could very well morph to a trade school department – granting course credit for practice, pre-game reviews, play-book studies, physical training, and games played.

The expressed faith in the leaders of the faculty panel by University of Minnesota faculty leaders is indeed admirable. Admirable as well is the willingness of the school’s Faculty Consultative Committee to watch closely for any easing of academic standards for the sake of accommodating athletics. Thus, it appears that it will be the mission of this committee to avoid a University of Minnesota slip down a slippery slope to compromised academic excellence and priorities.

The most admirable of all activities would be the Faculty Consultative Committee standing up to the pressures to subvert their mission by the school’s administrators and members of the governing board who are likely beholden to money from the big-time college sports entertainment business that prioritizes winning athletic teams over excellence in academics. The work of the University of Minnesota’s Faculty Consultative

Committee will not be easy as there are troubling circumstances surrounding their watchdog task.

The following piece by Bob Gilbert, a former Associated Press writer and retired University of Tennessee news operations director is illuminating. It comes from his Jan. 26, 2007 syndicated column and reads as follows:

*"And there's this on the college sports "arms race" from the St. Paul Pioneer Press: *On the same day he finalized plans to build a \$288 million, on-campus football stadium, University of Minnesota president Robert Bruininks said he will champion cost reduction in college athletics when he joins the NCAA Presidents Council this summer.**

Talk about an oxymoron.

The costs of big-time college athletics have spiraled upward to an incredible rate, especially in coaches' salaries. When Minnesota head coach Glen Mason was fired earlier this month, he was making \$1.65 million. Southern Cal's Pete Carroll and Oklahoma's Bob Stoops are making in the neighborhood of \$3 million a year, Tennessee's Phil Fulmer \$2.05 million.

I'm going to be one of the voices for reform, said Minnesota's president, who okayed Mason's \$1.65 million a year."

It appears that the University of Minnesota is now in the process of generating material for an archetypal case study on how university presidents and chancellors work to get their faculty involved with them and the NCAA as coconspirators to keep tapped into the cash flow associated with the big-time college sports entertainment business. In this case, the cash will certainly help service the debt incurred by building a new \$288 million, on-campus football stadium and health-spa-like facilities for their athlete-entertainers.

Finally, a question: Who is going to provide accreditation for sports-themed majors? See "Who Accredits Alternative Ed Programs for College Athletes?".⁴

January 26, 2007

Web Links

1. <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/01/25/minnesota>
2. <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/01/24/hibbing>
3. <http://insidehighered.com/views/2005/01/20/sperber1>
4. http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Alternative_Ed.pdf

NOTE: This essay is based, in large part, on the author's comments on Doug Lederman's Jan. 25, 2007, "Easing Athletes' Academic Path" column.¹ The comments were posted at *InsideHigherEd.com* on Jan. 25 and 26, 2007.