

# Reclaiming Academic Primacy and Integrity in Higher Education

## Clips Guest Commentary

*In his signature style, our guest author draws an analogy to the tireless (and successful) efforts of conservationist John Muir as a lesson for reform of college athletics.*

By Frank G. Splitt, The Drake Group, 2-9-10

*Taking on the formidably resourced and politically connected NCAA cartel—with its ability to maintain secrecy to hide academic corruption and permit athletic priorities to trump academic priorities—represents a daunting challenge.*

**Like the Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks**, the athletics programs at America's institutions of higher learning can be considered to be precious resources. As we learned from their tireless advocate John Muir, the parks can enrich the life experience of their visitors. Similarly athletic programs can enrich the life experience of college students.

Unfortunately, both resources are vulnerable to relentless exploitation, over commercialization, and ruin if not operated and managed with transparency, accountability and oversight appropriate to the task.

As Muir found in the late 1800s and early 1900s, protecting the natural beauty of national parks—and for that matter the parks themselves—is a daunting task requiring the utmost in focus and perseverance to minimize debilitating exploitation by powerful commercial and political interests. During the course of his crusading efforts, he found it necessary to appeal to U.S. Presidents and the Congress to take action to help preserve and protect large natural areas.

So too it is with protecting athletic programs from exploitation by the commercial interests of their sponsoring colleges and universities via their membership in the NCAA cartel. The cartel does not play by its own rules—also doing its best to avoid meeting federal requirements and the application of federal law. Consequently, the cartel has an amazing ability to maintain secrecy to hide academic corruption—allowing athletic priorities to trump academic priorities.

Coping with the powerful forces and pressures stemming from the cartel's formidable resources—financial, legal, and political—not to mention its symbiotic relationship with the TV, cable, and print media, represents a truly daunting challenge.

Additional pressures coupled with real-world circumstances have made the protection task all the more difficult. For example, there are the pressures exerted by the school's governing boards, very wealthy boosters, athletic departments, and government officials who are all influenced by the strong pull of potential fame and fortune as well as the inexorable push of rabid fans and a sports-crazed public. The task is made even more difficult because of a lack of strong presidential leadership—the willful or forced abdication of the president's obligation to provide leadership in defense of academic integrity and priorities.

Over time these forces and pressures have combined to allow athletic programs to subordinate higher education's academic mission and morph into mass entertainment vehicles that tend to erode the very educational values and beneficial impacts that athletic programs ostensibly exist to promote.

Not only have the educational missions at many colleges and universities become warped and their financial burdens become weightier, but apparently the loss of academic primacy and integrity has become an acceptable cost of doing business in the college sports entertainment industry as well.

The reclaiming of academic primacy and integrity in higher education is in itself a daunting challenge. How daunting a challenge could this be? Many say the big money involved coupled with America's sports culture makes it an impossible task. Some reform-minded organizations have been persuaded to work with the cartel and so have become partially or totally co-opted.

Also consider the number of reform-minded college presidents who have experienced shortened tenures in office. An example of the incredible pressure that can be exerted on even a powerful president comes from the University of Miami where Donna Shalala allowed the admission of Willie Williams, a star football recruit, despite a lengthily arrest record and likely weak academic qualifications at a time (2004) when Shalala was totally focused on improving the school's academic image and squelching the perception that the Hurricanes were a team of "convicts."

Further consider the scarcity of faculty members who should be at the front lines fighting to reclaim academic primacy and integrity at their own schools. It appears that many faculty don't believe it's any of their business while others fear that working to reclaim academic primacy and integrity can not only be considered subversive, but also an invitation to intimidation and career-threatening retaliation by school administrations as well as being ostracized by fellow faculty and members of their communities. Untenured faculty members are too busy working to get tenure and usually are not in a position to challenge administrative policy on intercollegiate athletics.

Nonetheless, there is still a residual group of faculty who are addressing the challenge and persevering in the fight. They are members of The Drake Group (TDG)—a national network of volunteers consisting of college faculty, administrators, coaches and concerned citizens. Since its founding in 1999, TDG has fought to reclaim academic primacy in higher education—defending academic integrity in the face of the commercialized college sports entertainment industry.

Many of the issues related to this fight were discussed in two open letters sent to President Obama in 2009; see "The Drake Group's Open Letters to the President and His Administration" at <<http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama.pdf>> and <<http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama2.pdf>>. TDG is pursuing resolution of these issues with the U.S. Department of Education as well as with the U.S. Congress—dedicated to leading the fight to reclaim academic primacy and integrity in higher education. It is TDG's *raison d'être* as it continues to stand as a reform-minded organization that is independent of the NCAA cartel.

To learn more about TDG, please go to <<http://thedrakegroup.org/>>. For other views see Mark Yost's *Varsity Green: A Behind the Scenes Look at Culture and Corruption in College Athletics* and Allen Sack's *Counterfeit Amateurs: An Athletes Journey Through the Sixties to the Age of Academic Capitalism*. Yost decries the hypocrisy and corruption that permeates big-time college sports and how sports have come to negatively impact America's youth while Sack tells how the NCAA abandoned its central principle of amateurism in its pursuit of big money in the form of highly commercialized and professionalized big-time college athletics.

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