

TRUTH TELLING ON CAMPUS

Catholic colleges and universities could lead the way

by Frank G. Splitt

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In a cover story based on an earlier speech to his faculty, Fr. John Jenkins, C.S.C., the new president of the University of Notre Dame, discussed issues surrounding the ability of institutions to maintain their Catholic identity while sustaining academic freedom [1]. Jenkins centered compelling observations on two of the three controversies that have swirled about the university in recent years – the fate of “The Vagina Monologues,” a play celebrating women’s sexuality, and the Queer Film Festival, devoted to gay and lesbian cinema – signaling a willingness to exercise his authority only after broad consultation.

This willingness is really encouraging since it stands in stark contrast to the handling of the third controversy that attracted considerably more media attention than the others. It involved the termination of Tyrone Willingham – breaking the university’s long-standing tradition of honoring its contract commitment to their football coach.

The termination was accomplished by a small group of trustees and university officials -- including then incoming president Fr. Jenkins – apparently without listening to and taking seriously contrary voices and prompting then president Fr. Edward Malloy to say he was “embarrassed to be president of Notre Dame” [2]. Unfortunately, incoming and sitting presidents are in no position to oppose the will of prominent and wealthy sports boosters, especially those that sit on governing boards.

This action allowed the university to quiet rabid fans and alums that were threatening to withhold contributions as well as hire a new pro-level coach. The expectation? – an accelerated return of Notre Dame’s football program to national prominence and really big money. To many, the action signaled the end of an era at Notre Dame as it adopted the win-at-any-cost business model of its competitors and provided yet another example of the ability of money to trump principle. No longer can it be said that Notre Dame stands above the mess in the world of the big-time (Div 1A) college-sports entertainment business that, all too often, displays hallmarks of hypocrisy, secrecy, deceit, and deception.

The college-sports entertainment business not only maintains a virtual stranglehold on America’s institutions of higher education, but also serves as a major distraction from their academic mission – undermining America’s ability to face up to global realities [3, 4]. It also spawns varying degrees of academic corruption with a corresponding need to keep the public and the Congress in the dark. The dearth of academic skills and knowledge imparted to athletes, whose primary aim is to play professionally, is shrouded by the Buckley Amendment to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act that impedes truth telling – effectively shielding academic corruption in intercollegiate athletics.

But there could be good news in all of this.

Paraphrasing a related editorial [5] – for reasons that go far beyond the merits of a single film festival or play, the experiment in broadly based dialogue at Notre Dame bears careful watching. It could very well serve as a model for a much wider discussion on the Catholic identity of its institutions as well as a discussion of the hypocrisy related to the big-money sports programs on its college and university campuses.

The presidents of our Catholic colleges and universities could be moved to solicit advice from their faculty and others on the place of the value-distorting, sports entertainment business in their schools. They might even go so far as to provide independently verifiable evidence that their athletes are bona fide, degree seeking students. For example, they could publish aggregated (Buckley-compliant) academic data from cohorts of football and basketball team athletes – providing the names of the faculty (along with the title of the courses and course GPA) who are providing university-level courses for many academically unprepared athletes who have a full-time (athletic) job, miss numerous classes, and come dead tired to others.

This would be a breakthrough of historic proportions since getting institutions of higher education to tell the truth – making public information on how they do, or don't, educate athletes has been a long and arduous battle. As Paul Gallico wrote some 70 years ago in *FAREWELL TO SPORT* (with reference to the Amateur Athletic Union): "One of the easiest things in the world is not to have evidence when evidence is liable to prove embarrassing."

Perhaps, the University of Texas, the University of Southern California, Ohio State University, Duke University, the University of Connecticut, Florida State University, the University of Michigan, and other top-ranked schools in college sports might also be moved to tell the truth about how they manage to maintain eligibility for their athletes as well as avoid being punished by the NCAA's new Academic Progress Rate measure that has hurt lesser-ranked schools [6].

Stranger things have happened, but just don't bet on it happening without government intervention.

REFERENCES

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