

Employing Academically Unqualified College Athletes

a CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

Different approaches in Minnesota: while a community college indefinitely suspended its football program, U-Minn flirts with allegedly lower standards by allowing more athletes into sports-themed majors.

by Frank G. Splitt

INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that college sports are deeply embedded in our American culture. Not as widely known is that enormous conflict can arise on campuses where the love of sports is coupled with an overbearing drive to use athletics to generate publicity, camaraderie, and, most important of all, money.

Inevitably, circumstances will arise that force parties with opposing points of view on contentious issues to make difficult choices and compromises between competing principles and loyalties – often under great pressure. Nowhere is this more evident than on campuses where faculty members must work to reclaim/maintain academic primacy over athletics, particularly at schools engaged in the athletics arms race that is characterized by skyrocketing salaries for coaches, ‘stadium wars,’ and cutthroat competition for academically qualified athletes.

Unfortunately, the demand for academically qualified athletes, especially for the superb athletes, far exceeds the supply. Thus, in order to stay competitive in a win-at-any-cost environment, schools are forced to recruit and employ superb athletes who are not only academically unqualified, but also unlikely to have a desire to obtain a legitimate education. They simply want to ‘play ball.’ This ‘end-justifies-the-means’ practice can easily lead to academic corruption and regrettable unintended consequences.

Thanks to a pair of informative news pieces posted at *InsideHigherEd.com* on Jan. 24 and 25, 2007, we now have good insight into the prevailing circumstances at Minnesota’s Hibbing Community College and the University of Minnesota. These two schools are confronting the issues surrounding the employment of academically at-risk college athletes with distinctively different approaches. In view of congressional inquiries into the tax-exempt status of the NCAA and intercollegiate athletics, the information contained in the *InsideHigherEd.com* stories is not only relevant, but timely as well. There follow commentaries on each of these pieces.

NUMBERS NOT LIKELY TO ADD UP AT BIG-TIME SCHOOLS

In her Jan. 24, 2007, *InsideHigherEd.com* column, “When Football Numbers Don’t Add Up,”¹ Elizabeth Redden provides the following eye-catching numbers from Minnesota’s Hibbing Community College:

- The average grade point average for football players at Hibbing over the past five years has been 1.81, compared to the 2.67 average boasted by students on Hibbing’s other six sports teams.

- 90 percent of Hibbing's football players enroll in at least one remedial course – while the percentage of students on other teams doing remedial coursework ranges from 6 percent (golf) to 61 percent (men's basketball).
- About 90 percent of the 63 football players come from out-of-state while by and large, the balance of the College's 1,200-student population hails from the local community according to Provost Ken Simberg

These numbers illuminate the downside of admitting academically unqualified athletes to field a winning team – telling a sad tale about schools that can't afford to provide the academic support required by such students.

To its credit, on Jan. 25, Hibbing Community College 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.

Minnesota's Hibbing Community College's numbers can also tell a tale about big-time college football and men's basketball programs across the nation. Most of these NCAA Div I schools have sports programs that are supported by wealthy boosters (with many sitting on school governing boards). Unlike Hibbing, these colleges and universities are able to invest millions of dollars to provide cover for academic corruption that enables the recruitment and retention of academically unqualified athletes. It's simply a cost of doing business in the big-time college sports entertainment industry. But how could this go on in some of America's most prestigious colleges and universities?

Here, consideration of the tax-exempt status of the NCAA cartel is instructive. The core issue surrounding the NCAA's tax-exempt status (and its so-called 'student-athletes') is this: lacking tangible and verifiable evidence, the government must presently take the word of school administrators that the athletes working for 'million-dollar,' celebrity and other big-time coaches are really students on track to receive a bona fide, rather than a "pretend" college education.

Course tracks for many athletes that must pretend to be students are usually engineered by academic support center staff members who work at the behest of the school's athletic department. This is a blatant conflict of interest and a surefire recipe for academic corruption since the primary motivation for the athletic department is not education, but winning and revenue generation. As Walter Byers, who served as NCAA executive director from 1951 to 1987, said when speaking of a college's reporting on the necessary progress that has been made on the rehabilitation of at-risk high school graduates: *"Believe me, there is a course, a grade, and a degree out there for everyone."* What he didn't say is that money can help make football (and men's basketball) academic numbers add up.

As incredible as it may seem, without transparency, oversight and accountability mechanisms, the government is in a position where it must trust schools that, in many instances, give every appearance of not only being secretive, but untrustworthy as well. Most likely, the direct-study fiasco at Auburn University (exposed by *The New York Times'* Pete Thamel) is simply representative of what's going on in big-time college sports – the tip of an iceberg of widespread academic corruption in big-time schools.

Besides the potential loss of sports revenues and publicity, there is a compelling need for some schools to report very high graduation rates to justify/rationalize their high-profile programs and their extraordinary investments in staff and facilities for alternative education programs for their athletes — undermining academic standards and corrupting behavior in the school as a whole.

The above, combined with self assessment and reporting, as well as weak enforcement, and even weaker penalties for infractions, provide an enormous incentive for these and other less conflicted schools to scheme and cheat. After all, the schools apparently believe that it's only wrong if they get caught. But, who's going to catch them and what's to lose if they do get caught?

Many school officials seem to believe that outcomes assessment is none of the government's business and are quick to appeal to privacy provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to avoid disclosure, especially in the case of the academic performance of the athletes in their moneymaking sports programs. However, FERPA's privacy provisions do not apply so long as individual students are not identified in aggregated data.

Congress should hold the NCAA (and its member institutions) accountable for the substantial financial support received from America's taxpayers by conditioning the continuation of the NCAA's tax-exempt status on the NCAA meeting specific requirements aimed at increasing the transparency, accountability and oversight of its operations.

A big first step in this direction would be disclosure of courses taken by FERPA compliant cohorts representing 50% of their member school's football and basketball team players with the most playing time, the average grades for the athletes and the average grades for all students in those courses, the names of advisors and professors who teach those courses, and whole-period class attendance records.

It would come as no surprise to find that such records would bear a striking resemblance to those obtained from Minnesota's Hibbing Community College — signaling an urgent need to reconnect athletics with the academic objectives of America's institutions of higher education.

For more, see "Why a Congressional Hearing on Intercollegiate Athletics?"² and "Easing Athletes' Academic Path: A Step Down a Slippery Slope?"³ January 26, 2007

Web Links

1. <http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/01/24/hibbing>
2. http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Why_A_Congressional_Hearing.pdf
3. http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Easing_Athletes_Academic_Path.pdf

NOTE: This essay is based on the author's comment "Why Not a Congressional Hearing?" on Tom Witosky's article "Grassley: Do college-athletic donations merit tax deductions?," in the Jan. 18, 2007, issue of *The Des Moines Register* and his comment on Elizabeth Redden's Jan. 24, 2007, column "When Football Numbers Don't Add Up."

EASING ATHLETES' ACADEMIC PATH: A STEP DOWN A SLIPPERY SLOPE?

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 lead to a 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 Press⁴:

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 co-conspirators 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?".⁵

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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. The St. Paul Pioneer Press article quoted by Bob Gilbert was authored by John Shipley, published on Jan. 4, 2007, and headlined "Bruinicks: Athletic costs out of control," <http://www.twincities.com/mld/twincities/sports/colleges/16378338.htm?template=contentModules/printstory.jsp>
5. http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Alternative_Ed.pdf

NOTE: This essay is based 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.

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