

On Reforming College Sports and Curbing Profligate Spending

Clips Guest Commentary

Our guest author describes the rock and hard place that plagues college presidents in their oversight of college athletics. Few of them have the capacity, the will, or the appetite to lead a true reform movement in college sports.

By Frank G. Splitt, The Drake Group, 10-29-09

Background – It is now almost six years since the publication of my first brief on college sports reform.¹ Reference to this brief will show inputs from the founding co-chairs of the Knight Commission, Dr. William C. Friday and the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh who concluded the Foreword by saying:

Like the Knight Commission Reports, this brief serves as a clarion call to university presidents, trustees, administrators and faculties. It should help to not only enhance their collective awareness, but stimulate debate, and prompt a more determined search for workable solutions and collaborative action as well. It is my fervent hope that readers will go further and ultimately become involved with facets of the reform movement that lie within their respective spheres of influence. As we stated in the 2001 Knight Commission Report: "Change will come, sanity will be restored, only when the higher education community comes together to meet collectively the challenges its members face."

Bill Friday contributed this commentary:

Every thoughtful sports fan knows that intercollegiate sports are in serious difficulty. The Knight Commission has led the effort to bring about major change and fundamental change has occurred. Much remains to be done and Frank Splitt's Brief signals the role faculties must play. The challenge is great; I believe the faculties will respond.

The challenges to meaningful reform have indeed been great. The clarion calls to university presidents, trustees, administrators and faculties have fallen on mostly deaf ears. Faculties responded as best they could but the opposing constituencies are truly powerful; and the perceived monetary and psychic rewards for maintaining the status quo are considered too great to be ignored by their administrations.

Adding to the difficulty of achieving reform has been the fact that the so-called 'watch-dog' Knight Commission strayed far off the course set by its founding co-chairs—serving as an apparent surrogate for the NCAA ever since the end of the Hesburgh-Friday tenure.

The Knight Commission's October 26, 2009 Meeting – The meeting was keyed to the release of the Commission's report on its survey of presidents from Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions—previously known as Division IA schools—that found skyrocketing football and basketball coaches' salaries "the greatest impediment" to the "stability" of college athletics as we know it.² In her commentary on the meeting, *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* Libby Sander wrote:³

A majority of college presidents at the nation's largest athletics programs feel powerless to contain the escalating costs associated with big-time college sports, and are hard-pressed to identify an entity that can.

Independent sports columnist, Bob Gilbert said:⁴

Most presidents of universities with major sports programs confessed cowardice and fear of trustees and boosters when asked why they don't stop uncontrolled spending for athletics.

The Knight Commission on College Athletics, in a report based on interviews with 95 of the 120 presidents of Division I-A universities, said the spiraling cost of their sports programs is unsustainable and threatens the future of academics in America.

"We've reached an indefensible, unsustainable situation. Universities are being forced to eliminate (academic) programs, reduce hiring (and) increase class size," said the commission co-chairman William Kirwan, chancellor of the University of Maryland.

What's really news here is the Commission's clear recognition of what has been well known to reform-minded individuals and organizations for several years—school presidents are in no position to participate in meaningful college sports reform efforts, let alone lead such efforts. As Dr. Jim Duderstadt, President Emeritus and University Professor of Science and Engineering at the University of Michigan, has said:⁵

Both my book and the 2001 Knight Commission report urgently portrayed the threat to American higher education posed by the ever-increasing commercialization and corruption of big-time college sports, neither proposed an effective method to deal with the problem. Put simply, in both cases we bet on the wrong horse. We proposed that the university presidents take the lead in the reform of college sports, whether through academic organizations such as the AAU and ACE (my proposal) or the NCAA (the Knight Commission). And nothing has happened.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. After all, university presidents are usually trapped between a rock and a hard place: between a public demanding high quality entertainment from the commercial college sports industry they are paying for, and governing boards who have the capacity (and all too frequently the inclination) to fire presidents who rock the university boat too strenuously. It should be clear that few contemporary university presidents have the capacity, the will, or the appetite to lead a true reform movement in college sports.

Nevertheless, presidents were positioned on the NCAA's Executive Board and held leadership positions on the Knight Commission. Reform-minded organizations—often labeled as critics—were not really welcomed at the table.

Unfortunately, defenders of the status quo have, for many years, viewed the issues surrounding the rampant commercialization, professionalization, and profligate spending of big-time collegiate athletics much too narrowly to see the perils ahead—including the erosion of the long-term viability of America's higher education enterprise as well as its position in the 21st-century's global economy.⁶

Advocating for Federal Intervention – Briefly stated, the genesis of The Drake Group's advocacy for government intervention in college sports is as follows. Three years after the publication of the Knight Commission's 2001 report,⁷ it became evident that the Commission was not following up on the reform recommendations set forth in this thoughtfully prepared report—a great disappointment to reform-minded faculty to say the least. Further disappointment came when the Commission expressed no interest whatsoever in the Group's reform-oriented essays.^{1, 7}

Given these disappointments and experience that indicated government intervention was likely the only way to transcend the vested self-interests of NCAA and school officials, The Drake Group launched its congressional initiative in the fall of 2004. The aim was the restoration of academic primacy at our nation's institutions of higher learning.

Key documents—references 1, 7, and 8—were used to provide background for members of Congress and their staffers at the Senate Finance Committee as well as at the House Committee on Ways and Means. Subsequent essays^{9, 10} have continued to sustain this initiative.

Indications are that the situation is now such that only the government can protect America from the higher education establishment's greed, mismanagement, and lack of foresight re: operating \$multi-million sports entertainment businesses. Why?—because responsible individuals and organizations continue to be involved in self-defeating behavior centered on protecting their own vested interests. Besides, the federal government is the only entity that has the power to curb the escalating costs associated with big-time college sports.

As evidenced by numerous essays,¹¹ and our work with the House Ways & Means Committee as well as with the Senate Finance Committee, we of The Drake Group have been advocating government intervention for the past five years—lately in open letters to President Obama,¹² and most recently in several letters sent to the president and CEO of the Knight Foundation prior to the October 26, Commission meeting. Here is an excerpt from one of the latter letters:

Yes, of course, the government should not interfere if non-government organizations such as the Commission are performing well and getting meaningful results when addressing serious issues. However, the government not only may intervene but must intervene in the national interest if they are not.

In this case, intervention would mean the imposition of measures of transparency, accountability, and oversight adequate to the task of reclaiming academic primacy and integrity in higher education as well as determining what's really needed to accomplish the reintegration of college sports into the moral and institutional culture of the university—a goal set forth in the referenced 2001 Commission report.

The Drake Group is asking you as the president and CEO of the Knight Foundation to urge the Foundation Trustees and its Commission not to give up on college sports reform. The Commission's endorsement of The Drake Group's appeal for government intervention would be a meaningful step on the path to this reform.

Future Outlook – It was refreshing to see that a number of Commission members now grasp the enormity of the negative impact that professionalized college sports can have on higher education. Hopefully, the above and other recent messages¹³ from The Drake Group urging the president and CEO of the Knight Foundation, not to give up on college sports reform may influence the Foundation to:

- o Take a hard look at its Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics that gives the distinct impression that rather than working for meaningful athletic reform, it is allowing itself to be used to further the NCAA's own vested, money-making, commercial interests via exploitative commercialization of college sports.
- o Get the Commission back on track by requiring it to act in a way that will result in affecting positive change as it pertains to placing academic interests ahead of athletic interests.

The Drake Group takes seriously the threat posed to higher education in America by the uncontrolled professionalization, commercialization, and profligate spending of college sports. Government intervention can get academic values and priorities set above those of intercollegiate

athletics. Failure to do so may not lead to the fall of America, but, over time, life for its citizens would surely be changed irrevocably and certainly not for the better as the nation will have a superbly entertained workforce that isn't able to compete in the 21st-century's global marketplace.

To the best of my knowledge, the Commission did not provide the requested endorsement of The Drake Group's appeal for government intervention at their October 26, meeting. Only time will tell the future direction of the Knight Commission and professional college sports, as well as the ultimate fate of higher education in America.

NOTES

1. Splitt, Frank G., "Reclaiming Academic Primacy in Higher Education," IEC Publications, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Reclaiming_Academic_Primacy.pdf, December 2003.
2. Wiener, Jay, "College Sports 101: A Primer on Money, Athletics, and Higher Education in the 21st Century," October 2009, http://www.knightcommission.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=344&Itemid=83.
3. Sander, Libby, "College Presidents Say They're Powerless to Control Big-Time Athletics," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 26, 2009.
4. Gilbert, Bob, "Big-time college athletics: An indefensible, unsustainable situation?," *College Athletics Clips*, October 28, 2009.
5. Quote taken from Duderstadt's *Epilogue to the Paperback Edition of Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University: A University President's Perspective*, First paperback edition, University of Michigan Press, 2003.
6. Splitt, Frank G., "Sports in America 2007: Facing Up to Global Realities," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Sports_in_America_2007.pdf, 2007. Also see *The Chronicle of Higher Education's "Special Report: As The U.S. Retrenches, Asia Drives Growth Through Higher Education*, October 9, 2009. The report features articles by Karin Fischer—"America Falling, Longtime Dominance in Education Erodes"—and Mara Hvistendahl—"Asia Rising: Countries Funnel Billions into Universities," "Singapore: Teaming Up With Foreign Universities for Innovation," and "China: Attract Talent First, and Outstanding Universities Will Follow."
7. Knight Commission, *A Call to Action: Reconnecting College Sports and Higher Education*, 2001, http://www.knightfoundation.org/research_publications/detail.dot?id=178173
8. Splitt, Frank G., "The Faculty-Driven Movement to Reform Big-Time College Sports," Foreword by James J. Duderstadt, Afterword by Jon Ericson, IEC Publications, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Sequel.pdf, July 2004.
9. _____, "The U.S. Congress: New Hope for Constructive Engagement with the NCAA and Intercollegiate Athletics," *The Montana Professor*, mtpref.msun.edu/Spr2007/splitt.html, 2007.
10. _____, "The Drake Group Comments on the Revised IRS Form 990" http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_TDG_IRS_Commentary_091207.pdf, September 12, 2007.
11. _____, *Essays and Commentaries on College Sports Reform*, The Drake Group, <http://thedrakegroup.org/splittessays.html>, 2003-2009.
12. Otto, Kadence, and Splitt, Frank G., "The Drake Group's Open Letters to the President and His Administration," <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama.pdf> and <http://thedrakegroup.org/Obama2.pdf>, 2009
13. _____, "October 6, 2009, Letter to Mr. Alberto Ibargüen," http://thedrakegroup.org/Knight_CEO_100609.pdf.

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