

## NCAA Reforms a Subterfuge for Fueling the Arms Race in Intercollegiate Athletic Spending

Last week, I left the confines of Division 1 athletics and delivered a commencement address at a Division 3 college where student-athletes compete without scholarship in true amateur fashion. If you travel far enough back in the last century, that's the way it was in intercollegiate athletics, as evidenced by Daniel James Brown's fine book on the University of Washington rowing team, "The Boys in the Boat." It was the 1930s and the young men who won the gold medal in crew at Hitler's Olympics were not on scholarship. They were just glad to get on the team so the university could line up a part-time job on campus to help pay their tuition.

The NCAA has ranged far afield from the amateur athletics model of days gone by and most of the reforms recently proposed by the NCAA move it closer to professional sports. Of course, Division 1 athletics is already big business, producing millions of dollars in revenue for universities willing and able to make the most expensive investments in their programs — programs that look less and less like they bear any relationship to the university's mission and role.

To assure the largesse that intercollegiate athletics needs to feed itself and to perpetuate the dominance of a few, for years now the NCAA leadership has carefully controlled the decision-making structure at the Division 1 level. In the past, the BCS structure guaranteed monopoly control, but the so-called "high resource" five conferences seem to pull the strings these days, with two of the conferences taking the lead in calling the shots for the others. It seems they are never satisfied with their bloated athletic budgets, especially when threatened in recent years by upstart, so-called mid-major programs that steal recruits, oftentimes beat the big boys, "mess with" the national rankings and sometimes take postseason bowl games and revenue away from the anointed few. If they have the resources to outspend their Division 1 colleagues with fewer resources, then why not fix the NCAA rules to do so.

The latest round of NCAA reforms proposes a new governance structure that President Harris Pastides of the University of South Carolina described in a New York Times op-ed piece as allowing universities "to independently

determine at what level they can provide resources to benefit students.” Now there’s a sure-fire way to kick off a race for larger athletics budgets. At the very least, they are to be commended for their honesty.

Of course, this grab for money and power is couched in the noblest of terms — it’s all about the student-athletes and paying them beyond the scholarship because they generate revenue for the programs.

Forget the fact that only two of Division 1 sports — men’s football and men’s basketball — produce the millions of dollars that fuel the NCAA sports empire and member universities, although too many athletic departments operate in the red anyway. All other student-athletes, while valuable members of the university community, play little if any role in revenue generation for the university. They are called non-revenue sports for a reason.

So what do full scholarship athletes receive now for competing in Division 1 athletics? They will receive a scholarship consisting of full tuition, room and board, books and fees and will leave the university primarily debt-free, unlike the average university student who will leave with \$29,000 of debt. In some of the most expensive sports — football and basketball come to mind — special training tables give student-athletes access to a quantity and quality of food not provided to other students. Athletic programs provide academic support in the form of study halls, computer access, tutoring, advising and life skills programming, early registration of classes, usually not available to their non-athlete counterparts. Student-athletes receive special academic privileges such as signing up for class before the rush of other students, guaranteeing athletes get the classes of their choice. Student athletes receive free professional-level coaching, strength and fitness training, nutritional guidance and access to athletic trainers and physical therapists. In the case of football, athletes travel to games in chartered jets with first-class luxury.

It is sometimes hard to believe that our finest universities and their presidents are behind this effort to fuel what the former NCAA President Myles Brand termed the “arms race” in Division 1 athletic budgets. You would think that the primacy of the academic mission and the long-held principles of amateur athletics would trump the drive toward commercialism and professionalism in the athletic department. You would think that university presidents would be up in arms at the way the NFL and the NBA

use the universities' athletic departments as training camps and minor league clubs for professional sports.

It is beyond me why university presidents are so quick to fall in line with powerful conference commissioners who seem to be calling the shots with these NCAA reforms. But I have no doubt why the power conferences are working to separate themselves from some Division 1 universities who still see the value of equity and fairness in athletic funding. Lately, those pesky mid-major programs such as Boise State and many others have showed up the big boys for what they are — wasteful models of athletic spending that cannot be justified.

The year that Boise State beat Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl our entire football budget was less than the salary alone of the Oklahoma football coach. Today, as a USA Today database shows, the Boise State budget for the entire athletic program is \$37 million and I'm sure there are some who think that excessive. But contrast that budget to the University of Alabama at \$124 million, the University of Illinois at \$77 million, the University of Nebraska at \$83 million or the University of Missouri at \$64 million.

What accounts for the difference, you ask? The absurd specialization in staffing and coaching accounts for some of this, with recruiting coaches' assignments reaching as far down as the sophomore year in high school. How embarrassing to spend all that money and then have someone with half the budget or less beat you on Saturday afternoon or, more problematical, beat you in the academic progress department!

It's time for the NCAA to take a stand for fiscal responsibility and the rightful place of intercollegiate athletics in American higher education and put a stop to the arms race by rejecting all reforms related to enhancing an already premier and first-class experience for student-athletes.

Three aspects of the NCAA reforms do make sense and should take precedence over all other issues. First, improved medical monitoring and changes in some rules on the field can avoid the serious aftereffects of concussion injuries. Second, student-athletes deserve the opportunity to come back after their playing days and finish their education at the university's expense. Finally, there must be rules about how to protect a student from loss of an athletic scholarship because of a career-ending injury.

In the end, it's about getting our priorities straight and focusing on the real student-athlete issues, not those fabricated by the elite few with ulterior motives.

The NCAA cannot fall prey to phony arguments about student welfare when the real goal of some of these so-called reformers is to create a plutocracy of athletic programs that serves no useful purpose in American higher education.

Bob Kustra serves as President of Boise State University.