Elite Collegiate Athletics and the Academy: Criticisms, Benefits, and the Role of Student Affairs

Jackie Hyman & Matthew Van Jura

College sports play a special role in higher education by promoting student unity on campus, maintaining connections with alumni, and enhancing the overall student experience. There are some who claim that college sports have lost touch with their origins and have been consumed by a "win at all costs" mentality. Murray Sperber (2000) has suggested that at many institutions, athletic programs are hindering the quality of undergraduate education. This article will explore the history of collegiate athletics and show how current sports programs play an integral role in supporting multiple facets of universities. Given the negative history, culture, and perception surrounding college athletics, it is important for student affairs professionals to consider opportunities to correct these problems. Finally, this article will explore how a more cooperative partnership between student affairs and athletic departments at institutions with elite sports programs can benefit not only universities, but student-athletes as well.

Whether one cheers for the Badgers, Buckeyes, Terrapins, Catamounts, or any team in between, college sports serve as a source of entertainment and more importantly, play a vital role in higher education. Not every school boasts rich athletic traditions, nor does every campus feature a student body that lives and dies with their teams' successes and failures. Yet for schools where campus culture surrounding popular athletic events plays a significant part in defining the student experience, college sports take on an important role for multiple constituencies associated with the institution. Universities' athletic teams offer benefits to prospective students, current students, and alumni, as well as a unique educational opportunity for student-athletes. There are some critics, however, who believe that college sports do more harm than good, for both athletes and

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Having graduated from University of Maryland in 2008, Jackie Hyman is a Terp enthusiast, as well as a first-year HESA student. She is currently an Assistant Residence Director in the Honors College, and looks forward to the day that she can return to Maryland, where crabs and football are life and negative temperatures don't exist.

Matthew Van Jura is an alumnus of The Ohio State University, where he earned dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in Political Science and History. Matt is a first-year student in the HESA program, with an assistantship in Residential Life. He is confident that the Buckeyes will one day beat an SEC football team, but in the meantime finds solace in the fact that Michigan has now lost to Ohio State five years in a row.

non-athletes. When left unchecked, athletic programs run the risk of damaging the quality of undergraduate education by using athletes as a source of revenue rather than encouraging their responsibilities as students. While college athletics are not without fault, fixing the problems would be conceivably easier than condemning the entire establishment. In this capacity, student affairs professionals can help immensely in the holistic development of the student-athlete and redefine the role that college athletics play in the broader student experience. It is increasingly important for student affairs professionals to study the problems that have arisen in the past surrounding athletic culture and acknowledge the positive influences college sports can have on a campus. Pursuing collaborative efforts between athletic departments at institutions with elite sports programs and student affairs, practitioners can bolster the positive impact of sports programs on today's students and create a more unified campus community.

History of Athletics

Looking at the history of higher education in America, college sports have long played a key role in defining the student experience. These activities have encouraged schools to adopt their own traditions including colors, mascots, fight songs, and alma maters. By 1880, football grew in popularity to surpass all other sports at universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Rutgers, Michigan, and Cornell—some of the first institutions to adopt the game (Rudolph, 1990). For the first time, institutions of higher education began to understand the importance of intercollegiate relations through sports. In response to football's popularity, universities began to build larger stadiums on campus to accommodate the growing number of fans. By 1923, over 87,000 fans were filling the seats of Michigan Stadium, while some were still being turned away at the gates (Rudolph, 1990). Today, many of these stadiums at schools such as Michigan, Illinois, Louisiana State, and Ohio State remain iconic buildings on campus. Thelin (2004) introduced the idea of "subway alumni," (p. 214) where fans tuned in via radio broadcasts and newspaper coverage of sporting events. These loyal fans follow every game and make monetary contributions even though they never attended the institution. Rudolph (1990) noted that as time passed and football frenzy spread, many Americans began to feel as though the purpose of an American college or university was to field a football team.

Along with the passion, tradition, and loyalties that college athletics provided their institutions, these contests unfortunately proved to be an avenue for negative conduct as well. By the early 20th century, sporting events became opportunities for gambling and excessive alcohol consumption (Thelin, 2004). These behaviors were not only perpetuated by undergraduate spectators, but also alumni and, in some instances, the athletes themselves. To this day, the presence of alcohol abuse at sporting events remains a primary cause for disruptive fan behavior,

as well as a threat to the well-being of those choosing to drink before, during, or after the game. Another societal ill perpetuated by college sports is centered on racism. At one time, Black athletes who attended northern institutions were not allowed to play in games when their teams traveled south to play schools not yet integrated (Thelin, 2004). While civil rights legislation and judicial decisions have addressed this particular injustice, many other negative behaviors associated with sports are not as readily correctable. The portrayal of Native American mascots such as Chief Osceola, the Fighting Sioux, and Chief Illiniwek at Florida State, North Dakota, and University of Illinois, respectively, serve as examples. Since these behaviors are a part of college athletics' history, they have become ingrained in the culture of sports on campus. Addressing this culture and correcting it is possible, but will require an enormous effort.

Criticisms of Athletics

One of the foremost critics of college sports in today's culture is Murray Sperber. He has stated that the pervasive "win-at-all-costs" attitude within the collegiate landscape ultimately hurts "student-athletes," (or "athlete-students" as he refers to them). Rather than being educated, these students are viewed as a revenue source for their institution. For the student-athlete, the heightened demand to win means that success on the playing field becomes a full-time job. As a result, less attention is given to their success in the classroom and fewer resources are dedicated to preparing student-athletes for their life after college (Sperber, 2000). In *Beer and Circus* (2000), Sperber's criticisms also focused on the institutions that place big time college sports at the forefront and on the attitudes of today's college students who believe that partying and following their team are more important uses of their time than studying. Using anecdotal evidence, he presented cases that examine multiple facets of the problem, such as coaches who usurp the power of the university president, institutional partnerships with the beer industry, the fallibility of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), and the bottom line when it comes to paying for athletic programs.

Meanwhile, the quality of education that the typical undergraduate receives at these institutions suffers as well. Since many big time college sports programs are affiliated with Tier 1 research institutions, Sperber believed that these institutions try to bolster their image not by allocating funds for improving undergraduate academic programs, but rather by focusing on the quality of graduate research so as to gain national prestige. Throughout his book, Sperber argued that in the absence of an environment that stimulates undergraduate education, students resort to the culture of beer and circus by choosing to party, binge drink, and develop their social skills instead of their academic skills. A spokesperson for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation stated that the profile of a college or university with an undergraduate drinking problem is a school with a large ath-

letic program and/or a large Greek community. This correlation between alcohol consumption and sporting events extends beyond undergraduates to include alumni and fans.

College sports can have a negative impact on the student-athletes as well. In 2007, Sharon Stoll, a professor at the University of Idaho, conducted research that examined the moral reasoning capabilities of student-athletes (Dohrmann, 2007). Over the course of 20 years, she surveyed approximately 80,000 high school, college, and professional athletes. Asking participants to answer on a 5-point Likert scale using "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," or "strongly disagree," Stoll presented situations such as:

> During a volleyball game, player A hits the ball over the net. The ball barely grazes off player B's fingers and lands out-of-bounds. However, the referee does not see player B touch the ball. Because the referee is responsible for calling rule violations, player B is not obligated to report the violation. (Dohrmann, p. 67)

Questions such as these tested the athletes' level of honesty and moral reasoning within scenarios based on their active participation in athletics. By assessing the responses to these dilemmas, Stoll evaluated the athletes' ability to make ethical decisions. She observed that female athletes have shown higher moral reasoning abilities in the past, but trends show a convergence with the lower scores of male athletes. Furthermore, athletes who play revenue-generating sports, such as football and basketball, have, on average, the lowest scores (Dohrmann, 2007), suggesting that these visible athletes are held less accountable for their actions.

College athletics has the opportunity to teach lessons such as the importance of healthy competition, wellness, work ethic, teamwork, and personal awareness. When competition fails to promote these learning outcomes, then college athletics not only fails to achieve its intended purpose, but denies athletes the holistic education they deserve. Stoll's study suggested that for these more visible athletes, a sense of privilege has pervaded their thinking in regards to the responsibilities they share as members of the academy and as members of a greater society. For athletes who see themselves on national television, practice in multimillion-dollar facilities, and frequently read about themselves on the front page of the campus newspaper, the expectation becomes that of athletic excellence and nothing else. Reinforced by coaches, peers, and media, this mentality comes at the expense of academic and personal development. Unfortunately, student-athletes are not maturing at the same rate as non-student-athletes.

Benefits to Student-Athletes

Contrary to popular belief, athletic programs have a huge stake in the development of their student-athletes. Within practices, games, and team meetings, the student-athletes are doing more than simply exercising and learning strategic plays. They are learning important life lessons such as teamwork, focus, and perseverance. In 2005, Potuto, Larson and O'Hanlon surveyed an array of student-athletes from eighteen different NCAA Division 1A institutions. To ensure participants had "sufficient time on campus to provide well informed responses," athletes involved must have already completed at least 85 credit hours (p. 947). The results of this survey found that 90% or higher of the students felt as though their participation in athletics had strongly influenced their leadership skills, teamwork, work ethic, ability to take responsibility for oneself, decision making ability, and time management skills. As one individual athlete commented in the survey, "athletics teaches you to persevere, motivate yourself, and be self-reliant. It also improves skills in dealing with others" (p. 11).

Collegiate athletics has been successful in creating community, despite the belief that college campuses "have become a group of 'multiple communities' where our disparate goals work against the creation of a common campus community" (Kerr, 1982, p. 373). According to Wolf-Wendel, Douglas, & Morphew (2001), "intercollegiate athletics has accomplished much of what institutions generally are attempting to achieve in building community out of difference" (p. 370). Athletics programs have been successful because they have focused on the shared athletic experience, rather than the differences that separate their community. Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) suggested eight commonalities that make athletic programs successful: (a) student-athletes share common goals: to grow, improve, and ultimately, win; (b) through practices, classes, and living spaces, they engage in intense and frequent interaction; (c) they share common experiences of adversity through hard work, suffering, and sacrifice; (d) in working together to build a team, they recognize that each individual has something important to contribute to their collective success; (e) they hold each other accountable in terms of academic performance; (f) they hold each other accountable in terms of performance on the field, court, etc.; (g) they have coaches who invest time in each individual and truly care about their successes to guide them through their experiences; and (h) through involvement in athletics as children, collegiate student-athletes have exposure to several different identities at a young age. "A remarkably strong sense of community exists" because of these several commonalities within the student-athletes experience, linking them "across most differences, including race, socioeconomic status, and geographic background" (p. 376).

Benefits to Overall Community

Expanding the scope, one can see that athletic programs help the surrounding neighborhood by embodying the entire campus community. An example of this is the University of Maryland - College Park, where coaches designate certain days outside of their practice schedules to engage in community service as a team. By instilling the importance of community service to student-athletes, coaches get their players accustomed to the idea of giving back to the community. Service can range from holding an annual winter coat drive for donation to local homeless shelters to spending a day with non-able-bodied children. These experiences humble student-athletes and allow them to see the positive impact that they have on others.

Athletic departments have a strong and positive impact on the relationship between past, present, and future students. When looking at mass spectator sports such as football and basketball, the attendance of games is what the 1990 Carnegie Report has called a "celebrative community" (p. 374). Uniting students, community members, faculty, and administrators, these games attract people from all different interest groups to the same location for two to three hours a week to show their loyalty to an institution, as well as their support for student-athletes. Few other events on campus have this potential. While programs planned by student organizations offer the prospect of education, networking, and social interaction, these events often target a specific demographic of the campus population at the assumed subconscious exclusion of others. Athletic events do, however, offer all members of the university the opportunity to wear the same colors, rally behind a common cause, and feel proud of the student-athletes who represent their school. The energy that runs through arenas across the country has the power to both unite and empower. The 1990 Carnegie Report noted that, "athletics have contributed greatly to the spirit of community on campus…powerfully uniting students, faculty and alumni behind a common passion" (p.59).

Benefits to the Campus Community

Legendary Alabama football coach Paul "Bear" Bryant once stated, "it's hard to rally around a math class" (Hunter, 2004, p. 11A). It is important to acknowledge the impact that athletics has on campuses where the popularity of sports programs is a major interest for students. Sports generate spirit and pride that, in turn, generate community amongst students. This is not to say that institutions that have strong athletic programs are any better than schools that do not, nor does it imply that students with teams to follow have a better undergraduate experience than students whose interests may lie elsewhere. Rather, the experiences and attitudes of students who are attracted to institutions with a strong tradition of athletics are unique and should be acknowledged as a critical component of

their student experience. Athletics play a key role in shaping the campus environment at these institutions. College sports are one of the great unifying forces in higher education. The sight of tens of thousands of students, linked arm in arm and singing their alma mater at the conclusion of a game is a memory that many students will treasure for a lifetime.

At some traditionally athletic institutions, coaches may be more recognizable figures to the student body than the school's president. Although this happens on occasion, it is unfair to focus only on those individuals whose actions attract negative attention. What is unique about many of these figures is that when put in such a position of power, they often return the favor to their schools. For example, Coach Joe Paterno—head football coach at Penn State—and his wife have been instrumental in championing new construction and donating money to various projects on campus. One such project was the construction of the new main library, named after Coach Paterno. He has also served as the vice chairperson of the $352 million Campaign for Penn State, and together with his wife, made a $1 million donation for the creation of an all-faith center on campus (Antonacci, 1998).

Alumni associations, with missions of maintaining lifelong connections between students and their alma mater, are direct beneficiaries of this phenomenon. Following graduation, alumni may move hundreds or thousands of miles away from their institutions, but athletics provides a means of connection. Furthermore, when collegiate athletic contests are tied with annual events such as class reunions or homecoming celebrations, alumni participation increases. The Ohio State Alumni Association boasts over 125,000 members and over 400,000 living alumni of the institution and plans an annual Alumni Reunion Weekend (K. Bickle, personal communication, October 27, 2008). In the past, this event has alternated between the spring and the fall homecoming weekend. Compared with the years when the event was held in the spring, the association staff has noticed a sizeable increase in attendance when football game tickets were included in the weekend's festivities.

Student Affairs' Current Involvement

While there are negative aspects to college athletics, the positive qualities are more numerous. Many of these cited problems are correctable and present an opportunity for student affairs professionals to step in and make a difference for student-athletes, the undergraduate student body, and for all fans who support a particular team. One recommendation is for student affairs divisions to collaborate with athletic departments to implement programs such as the CHAMPS Life Skills Program (Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success). This program was born through a collaborative relationship between the NCAA Foundation

and the Division 1A Athletic Directors' Association in an effort to provide support for all student-athletes. The philosophy behind this program supports the holistic development of the student-athlete, not focusing strictly on their academic or athletic ability. According to NCAA (2008), "the CHAMPS Life Skills program was created to support the student-athlete development initiatives of NCAA member institutions and to enhance the quality of the student-athlete experience within the context of higher education" (Program section, para. 1). Some of the goals of this program are to "promote student-athletes' ownership of their academic, athletic, career, personal and community responsibilities, foster an environment that encourages student-athletes to effectively access campus resources," and "encourage the development of character, integrity and leadership skills" (Program section, para. 2). Within these specific goals, student affairs professionals can get involved and support the athletic department in their mission of full student-athlete development. As of June 2008, there were 330 Division I institutions (including the University of Vermont), 155 Division II institutions, and 141 Division III institutions implementing the CHAMPS Life Skills program. With so many institutions applying this program, the gap that still exists between student affairs, higher education administrators, and athletic departments is surprising.

Both athletic departments and student affairs professionals aim to see student-athletes succeed inside and outside of the classroom. They help students develop into ambitious, well-rounded, hard-working critical thinkers. How can we, as student affairs and athletics professionals, work together to yield the most productive, efficient, and valuable service to our students? The Life Skills program is definitely a start, but what more can be done? How can we begin to build and foster a relationship to provide a seamless learning experience for our students?

Vanderbilt University has taken a radically creative approach and restructured their athletic department. In 2003, then Chancellor E. Gordon Gee, decided that the obligations student-athletes had to their teams often prevented them from being a part of the other student experiences on campus. He disbanded the athletic department and placed supervision of athletics under the control of the Division of Student Life. Administrators rearranged student-athlete practice schedules to ensure they could attend classes more easily, have more options in declaring majors, and even participate in experiences such as study abroad. Many viewed this change as Vanderbilt giving up being competitive in the South East Conference, but 5 years later the results have been notable. NCAA President Myles Brand supported the decision, noting it was a healthy solution for reintegrating student-athletes into the campus (Pope, 2008). Jensen Lewis, a baseball player and 2006 graduate now in the Major Leagues remarked, "You feel as much a part of someone winning a concerto competition as they feel part of you winning a baseball game" (p. 1). Statistically, the transformation has been a success

both academically and competitively.

The Lone Student Affairs Professional

All of this may seem overwhelming and larger than the single student affairs professional, but there are steps that can be taken on an individual level to work toward these goals of preparing student-athletes for personal and professional success following graduation. For example, we as student affairs professionals can begin to inquire more about this special student population through research and frequent interaction with student-athletes. Practitioners should solicit the expertise of personnel within athletic departments regarding the challenges and pressures that student-athletes face, as well as examine trends that they have observed within specific populations in order to begin building a working professional relationship. The more knowledge that is gained about the experiences, structure, and implementation within the athletic department, the better equipped student affairs professionals are to evaluate and assess the universality and accessibility of the current practices and services in place on campus. Do current services truly cater to all student populations, and do the professional staff within these services have any foundational knowledge of the challenges that student-athletes face?

Once practitioners have a clearer idea of the specific needs of this population, expertise can be offered to professionals within athletic departments, whether they are coaches, advisors, or other personnel. With the extensive education that student affairs practitioners have in student development and systemic approaches to institutional change and improvement, there are many services these professionals can offer. Examples include, but are not limited to, advising the athletic department on how to create, implement, and sustain a more student-centered approach to their current programming efforts. Practitioners may consult with athletic department staff to provide targeted programs and services to student-athletes dealing with high-risk issues such as alcohol use among teams (Brenner & Swanik, 2007). Additionally, they can provide athletic departments with resources that can better prepare them for questions that the student-athletes may have concerning issues outside of the athletic arena.

Not only can student affairs professionals act as consultants to athletic programs and personnel, but they can also take a more proactive and intentional approach to working with athletic departments on creating future programs that address the more prominent issues facing student-athletes. Practitioners should investigate why student-athletes do not seek out services offered by student affairs and how programming can be altered to become more inclusive. Collaboration on future efforts will show student-athletes that they have the necessary support not just from their coaches, but from student affairs staff as well. By initiating regular conversations with athletic department personnel, student affairs professionals

can begin to bridge the gap between the two departments.

With all of the positive contributions that athletics can offer, the strides that have already been made between the student affairs and athletic departments, and the potential that still exists, there is hope to spark conversation across divisions. With the help of the athletic departments, student affairs professionals will be better able to harness the energy that the student body possesses for a more involved and active campus climate. With the help of student affairs professionals, athletic departments will be able to better influence student culture through educational opportunities regarding alcohol consumption, inclusion, and healthy competition. Unfortunately, this is a collaboration that has too long been dormant in the United States system of higher education. By requiring a new approach, an open mind, and a pilot program similar to those demonstrated by Vanderbilt University and the University of Vermont, one can awaken a partnership that yields positive and productive results that all can benefit from, no matter where one's allegiances lie on game day.

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