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Why College Football Should Be Banned

The costs are high, the benefits to students are low, argues Buzz Bissinger. And academics pay the price

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By BUZZ BISSINGER



NCAA Photos

The average student gets nothing from football programs that remain sacrosanct despite tuition increases.

In more than 20 years I've spent studying the issue, I have yet to hear a convincing argument that college football has anything do with what is presumably the primary purpose of higher education: academics.

That's because college football has no academic purpose. Which is why it needs to be banned. A radical solution, yes. But necessary in today's times.

Football only provides the thickest layer of distraction in an atmosphere in which colleges and universities these days are all about distraction, nursing an obsession with the social well-being of students as opposed to the obsession that they are there for the

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vital and single purpose of learning as much as they can to compete in the brutal realities of the global economy.

Photos: A Legacy of Scandal



Associated Press

North Carolina football coach Butch Davis

Who truly benefits from college football? Alumni who absurdly judge the quality of their alma mater based on the quality of the football team. Coaches such as Nick Saban of the University of Alabama and Bob Stoops of Oklahoma University who make obscene millions. The players themselves don't benefit, exploited by a system in which they don't receive a dime of compensation. The average student doesn't benefit, particularly when football programs remain sacrosanct while tuition costs show no signs of abating as many governors are slashing budgets to the

bone.

If the vast majority of major college football programs made money, the argument to ban football might be a more precarious one. But too many of them don't—to the detriment of academic budgets at all too many schools. According to the NCAA, 43% of the 120 schools in the Football Bowl Subdivision lost money on their programs. This is the tier of schools that includes such examples as that great titan of football excellence, the University of Alabama at Birmingham Blazers, who went 3-and-9 last season. The athletic department in 2008-2009 took in over \$13 million in university funds and student fees, largely because the football program cost so much, The Wall Street Journal reported. New Mexico State University's athletic department needed a 70% subsidy in 2009-2010, largely because Aggie football hasn't gotten to a bowl game in 51 years. Outside of Las Cruces, where New Mexico State is located, how many people even know that the school has a football program? None, except maybe for some savvy contestants on "Jeopardy." What purpose does it serve on a university campus? None.

The most recent example is the University of Maryland. The president there, Wallace D. Loh, late last year announced that eight varsity programs would be cut in order to produce a leaner athletic budget, a kindly way of saying that the school would rather save struggling football and basketball programs than keep varsity sports such as track and swimming, in which the vast majority of participants graduate.

“ If you want to establish a minor league system that the National Football League pays for—which they should—that is fine. ”

Part of the Maryland football problem: a \$50.8 million modernization of its stadium in which too many luxury suites remain unsold. Another problem: The school reportedly paid \$2 million to buy out head coach Ralph Friedgen at the end of the 2010 season, even though he led his team to a 9-and-4 season and was named Atlantic Coast Conference Coach of the Year. Then, the school reportedly spent another \$2 million to hire Randy Edsall from the University of Connecticut, who promptly produced a record of 2-and-10 last season.

In an interview with the Baltimore Sun in March, Mr. Loh said that the athletic department was covering deficits, in large part caused by attendance drops in football and basketball, by drawing upon reserves that eventually dwindled to zero. Hence cutting the eight sports

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making the right sports.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. There are the medical dangers of football in general caused by head trauma over repetitive hits. There is the false concept of the football student-athlete that the NCAA endlessly tries to sell, when any major college player will tell you that the demands of the game, a year-round commitment, makes the student half of the equation secondary and superfluous. There are the scandals that have beset programs in the desperate pursuit of winning—the University of Southern California, Ohio State University, University of Miami and Penn State University among others.

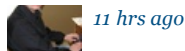
I can't help but wonder how a student at the University of Oregon will cope when in-state tuition has recently gone up by 9% and the state legislature passed an 11% decrease in funding to the Oregon system overall for 2011 and 2012. Yet thanks to the largess of Nike founder Phil Knight, an academic center costing \$41.7 million, twice as expensive in square footage as the toniest condos in Portland, has been built for the University of Oregon football team.

Always important to feed those Ducks.

I actually like football a great deal. I am not some anti-sports prude. It has a place in our society, but not on college campuses. If you want to establish a minor league system that the National Football League pays for—which they should, given that they are the greatest beneficiaries of college football—that is fine.

Call me the Grinch. But I would much prefer students going to college to learn and be prepared for the rigors of the new economic order, rather than dumping fees on them to subsidize football programs that, far from enhancing the academic mission instead make a mockery of it.

—Mr. Bissinger is the author of "Friday Night Lights." He will participate in a debate Tuesday evening at New York University, sponsored by Intelligence Squared, in which he and Malcolm Gladwell will argue that college football should be banned. (See [Ideas Calendar](#))



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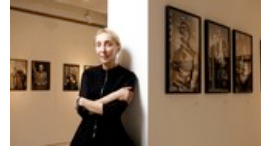
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