

# The Importance of Sports in U.S. Higher Education



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## Introduction

Sports have played an important role in American higher education for the past 150 years. Many scholars argue that sports, combined with academics, develop in students the virtues of tolerance, involvement, community spirit and leadership. Conversely, many researchers maintain that intercollegiate sports have a disproportionate importance, resources, power, and attention that harms student performance, academic programs, and the academic and research mission of American institutions of higher learning.

## Sports in U.S. Higher Education

Before 1850 athletics were peripheral to American higher education: “If there was a need for physical activity in the student regimen, college presidents and deans thought manual labor in the form of farming or clearing boulders from college lands fit the bill perfectly” (Thelin and Edwards 2014). However, by the 1890s student bodies themselves had organized intercollegiate athletic organizations and competitions in several “ivy league” institutions to satisfy their need for athletics. These early athletic events “included mechanisms for raising money, charging fees, sponsoring events, and selling tickets” with or without the administrations’ supervision (Thelin and Edwards 2014). Thus, from its origins, sports in American higher education have been linked to commercialism.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, New England colleges and universities, particularly Yale “the cradle of coaches,” lead the way to the administration’s financial and political control of intercollegiate athletics. In 1901, Harvard hired Bill Reid, “as a well-paid, full-time football coach”, setting the standard for the professionalization of athletic coaches (Thelin and Edwards 2014). Whereas

Yale’s Walter Camp was the first to “create an enterprising network of syndicated newspaper columns, annual guides, endorsements, and other lucrative, influential college sports publications” (Thelin and Edwards 2014).

Between the two World Wars the Northeast lost its dominance in varsity sports. The University of Chicago pioneered “the structure and control of high powered varsity sports programs” (Thelin and Edwards 2014). At the same time, varsity sports became “a symbolic litmus test of regional and/or ethnic esteem and assimilation” (Thelin and Edwards 2014). This was the case, for example, of the mid-western, Catholic, and mostly Irish-American University of Notre Dame in the 1920s. Since 1966 Super Bowls have taken place mostly in Miami (10 times), New Orleans (10 times), and Los Angeles (7 times) (Wood 2010).

Nevertheless, since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century students and alumni lamented that preference has been given to money-making spectator sports, like football and basketball, to the exclusion of other sports (Thelin and Edwards 2014). In the late 1960s, as track, soccer, lacrosse, hockey, wrestling, baseball, and swimming competitors demanded equal treatment, athletic scholarships began to be granted to athletes of these sports. Conversely, by the 1970s, this inclusiveness raised athletic departments’ operating costs that were not able to be covered by the relatively small fan base of these “new” varsity sports (Thelin and Edwards 2014).

Opportunities for intercollegiate sports as well as the construction of sports facilities increased at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium “reaching an estimated combined enrollment of 7.1 million students, with an estimated 5.3 million students considered heavy or regular users of established campus recreational sports programs and facilities” (NIRSA, 2005). At the

same time, American higher education “faced growing philosophical and economic problems” within their athletic departments (Theling and Edwards 2014). The 1991 and 2001 reform reports of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s *Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics* lamented the lack of government intervention, especially from the Department of Education, U.S. State Department, and the Executive, and highlighted the limits of such voluntary associations as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), in restoring academic and fiscal integrity in the governance of intercollegiate athletics (Knight 2010). Its 2010 reform report demanded measures “to contain athletics spending, to curb its commercialism, give priority to educational values, and treat college athletes as students first and foremost and not as professionals” (Knight 2010).

### The Benefits of Sports in Higher Education

As James Howell’s 1659 *Paramoigraphy* proverb states “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” (Howell 1659: 12). Per the Council for the Advancement of Standards in (U.S.) higher education (CAS):

Recreational sports programs are viewed as essential components of higher education, supplementing the educational process through enhancement of students’ physical, mental, and emotional development. Students who participate in recreational sports tend to develop positive self-images, awareness of strengths, increased tolerance and self-control, stronger social interaction skills, and maturity –all gleaned from recreational sports experiences (CAS 2008: 2).

Hence, athletics not only aid students keep an active lifestyle for life, they also teach the qualities of tolerance, confidence, the abilities to deal with setbacks and attacks, dealing with authority, obedience, managing conflict, concentration, focus and resilience, and a sense of self-worth and self-discipline (Kendrick 2015).

Several studies support the assertion that athletics can contribute to the development of self-esteem (Bailey 2014). Such self-confidence can affect other areas of life like academic performance. Many studies show that exercise releases endorphins that “trigger a positive feeling in the body, similar to that of morphine” (Smitha 2016). This positive feeling encourages peace of mind and greater concentration enhancing performance in

other fields. Therefore, sports education along with academics result in the “all-round development of the students as well as recruitment and retention” (CAS 2008: 2).

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Nevertheless, at the dawn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, American colleges and universities are more inclined to emphasize students’ mental development to the detriment of their physical development: “The overall outcome of this is that the developing groups of graduates and professionals have weak bodies and poor physique” (NIRSA 2005). Therefore, the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) urged that curriculums include sports, games and physical health education for the all-round development of the students (NIRSA 2005).

NIRSA also observed that although academic institutions differ one from another, it is up to administrations to fully commit themselves in finding the best ways to implement sports as an integral part of the curriculum (NIRSA 2005). NIRSA in its 1996 reform report delineated seven primary goals of recreational sports programs:

- 1 To provide participation in a variety of activities that satisfy the diverse needs of students, faculty, and staff members, and where appropriate, guests, alumni, and public participants can become involved.
- 2 To provide value to participants by helping individuals develop and maintain a positive self-image, stronger social interactive skills, enhanced physical fitness, and good mental health.
- 3 To enhance college and university student and faculty recruitment and retention initiatives.
- 4 To coordinate the use of campus recreation facilities in cooperation with other administrative units such as athletics, physical education, and student activities.

- 5 To provide extracurricular education opportunities through participation in recreational sports and the provision of relevant leadership positions.
- 6 To contribute positively to institutional relations through significant and high-quality recreational sports programming.
- 7 To cooperate with academic units, focusing on the development of recreational sports curricula and accompanying laboratory experiences.

As the Roman poet Juvenal taught as the first desirable thing in life: *Mens sana in corpore sano* –“a sound mind resides only in a sound body” (Juvenal 2001:10.356). A healthy and strong body is not possible without sports and physical activities. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also emphasizes the educational potential of sport: “Sports have a considerable potential for education especially among the youth, and for this reason, it plays a role of great importance not only in the use of free time, but also in the formation of the human person” (Benedict XVI 2009).

### The Dark Side of Sports in U.S. Higher Education

Nonetheless, as Maria Edgeworth’s *Harry and Lucy Concluded* proverb states: “All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy” (Edgeworth 1825). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and start of the 21<sup>st</sup>, as athletics increased and developed, so did the reevaluation of their institutional role and best practices in their administration (CAS 2008: 1).

Although recent research suggests that the inclusion of intercollegiate athletics benefits the academic missions of higher education institutions (Franklin 2006; Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, and Hannah 2006); others have warned that “the commercialization, exploitation, and distractions that have grown out of [American] intercollegiate athletics are detrimental to higher education” (Vanover and DeBowes 2013:44).

In considering the relationship between intercollegiate-football success and non-athlete student performance during nine football seasons (1999 through 2007), the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) concluded that,

The team’s success significantly reduces male grades relative to female grades. This phenomenon is only present in fall quarters, which coincides with the football season. Using survey data, we find that males are more likely than females to in-

crease alcohol consumption, decrease studying, and increase partying in response to the success of the team. Yet, females also report that their behavior is affected by athletic success, suggesting that their performance is likely impaired but that this effect is masked by the practice of grade curving (Lindo 2011: 1).

Moreover, during the 2005-2008 season in Football Bowl Subdivision Institutions athletics spending rose while academic spending was flat: “the growth over time for athletics spending was 37.9% compared to 20.5% for academic spending” (Knight 2010: 4). In 2005, the medians for academic spending per student compared to athletics spending per athlete was of \$11,079 USD vs \$61,218 USD. By 2008 it was \$13,349 USD vs \$84,446 USD (Knight 2010:4).

Thus, “median athletics spending per athlete at institutions in each major athletics conference ranges from 4 to nearly 11 times more than the median spending on education-related activities per student” (Knight 2010:4). This being the case though NIRSA complained that educational institutions are more inclined to emphasize, in general, students’ mental development to the detriment of their physical development (2005). As American higher education continues to face budget cuts, many question the perceived “immunity” of athletic departments from these budget restructurings to the detriment of academic programs, research, and students’ pocketbooks (Gallo 2016).

In its 2011 reform report the Knight Foundation laments that “the problems of big-time college sports have grown rather than diminished” (p. 4). The most flagrant problems highlighted in the report –academic transgressions, a financial arms race, and commercialization– all point to the ever-increasing distance between U.S. higher education’s mission and big-time college sports.

### Conclusion

Until the late 1800s, intramural sports were perceived by most U.S. higher education institutions to be of little instructional or educational value. By the 1950s there was a general realization of the intrinsic educational value of sports participation. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century experienced even greater expansion of collegiate recreational sports opportunities and facilities while at the same time questioning the role of athletics in American higher education.

Academic learning and sports education complement each other: “Recreational sports pro-

gramming significantly impacts [in a positive way] student life, development, and learning, as well as recruitment and retention” (CAS 2008: 2). However, there is great concern that big-time intramural sports are a threat to American higher education and whether it is desirable to be investing large amount amounts of public and student money in college sports without consideration of non-monetary costs as well monetary costs to the detriment of academic programs and students’ overall education.

Although NIRSA reports major improvements between big-time sports and academic achievement (see NIRSA 2004b), whether such necessary considerations will have an extensive and lasting impact, intercollegiate athletics continue to be, for better or worse (or both), an important part of U.S. higher education. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI prayed during his General Audience of January 9, 2008: “May sport... increasingly be a vehicle of education for the values of honesty, solidarity and fraternity, especially for the younger generation”. And at his General Audience of September 21, 2005, he added: May sport be “a tool for the teaching of life’s ethical and spiritual values.” Pope Francis has echoed those remarks in his video message to the 2017 Super Bowl in Houston, Texas: “By participating in sport, we are able to go beyond our own self-interest –and in a healthy way– we learn to sacrifice, to grow in fidelity and respect the rules” (Francis 2017).

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