Faculty’s Muted Response to the Rise of College Sports

J. Michael Rifenburg

In American higher education, a variety of factors have continued to widen the gap between athletics and academics causing the former to overshadow the latter. For one, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) academic compliance mandates—stipulating how and when a person may offer a student-athlete academic assistance—are vague legalese bylaws constructed to cripple an institution if broken. Additionally, the pressure to build a winning, revenue-generating athletic program often causes a school to consider a student-athlete’s athletic ability more important than potential academic weaknesses which, in turn, often results in matriculating student-athletes not capable of surviving a school’s academic rigor. Increased demands on student-athletes’ time—charity appearances, practice schedules, traveling for road games—eat into important time that could be directed toward study also push apart athletics and academics.

But beyond encroaching on academic turf, college sports can stain a school’s credibility as evidenced by a slew of recent incidents: a former assistant football coach at Penn State convicted of sexual assault, the FBI probing a point-shaving scandal for a former player on Auburn’s men’s basketball team, an athletic academic staff member writing papers for members of the North Carolina men’s football team, a freshman basketball player at Oklahoma taking money from a financial advisor, several TCU football players arrested in a police sting for drug possession with intent to distribute, and the list goes on and on. All the incidents have taken place within the last two years and occurred at “big-time” programs, schools with a tradition of
success on the athletic field. As a result of these factors, and many more unmentioned, academics and athletics struggle to coexist to the detriment of all parties affiliated with higher education.

In what follows, I provide a brief history of the rise of college sports in American higher education, focusing on events which should have tipped-off faculty that athletics were quickly overshadowing academics. Doing so, allows me to suggest that much to our harm, we, the faculty and stewards of our respective colleges and universities, have a long history of ignoring college sports and are now placing our institutions in the precarious position of attempting to balance the two. In the final section, I explore the most recent faculty effort to ameliorate this distressing position: the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics. The COIA, I hold, is most properly positioned to invite us to drop our muted responses and take an active role in reforming college sports to our, our schools’, and our students’ benefit.

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The uneasy relationship between school and sport is reaching a tipping point. In a December 16, 2011 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, the following headline screamed across the front: “What the Hell Has Happened to College Sports? And What Should We Do About It?” While the Chronicle is not hesitant to promulgate a rhetoric of excess through shocking headlines or images on their covers (a November 2011 issue showed a UC Davis campus policeman pepper-spraying peacefully protesting students in the face), the loud headline decried the growing chasm between athletics and academics, the increase of scandals in college athletic programs, and the general unrest among academics regarding the place of college sports on campuses of higher education.
Certainly the Chronicle has spoken before on the growing force that is “intercollegiate athletics,” the commonly preferred term used by athletic departments. However, the majority of their pieces focus on the financial aspects of athletic programs. For example, in September 2009 Libby Sander and Brad Wolverton’s article “Debt Loads Weigh Heavily on Athletic Programs” focused on the financial burden imposed on athletic programs—and we can infer by extension academic departments who often but not always share a budget with athletics—through the financing of mammoth stadiums: Oklahoma State recently completed a $288 million renovation, while the University of Minnesota finished construction on a new football stadium for $289 million. As Sander and Wolverton report, both the NCAA and academia fear athletic programs are spiraling deeper into debt with the burden of payment ultimately falling on the shoulders of the academic component of an institution, not the athletic department. Just two months later, Wolverton’s “Recession Clouds Future of Stanford’s Storied Sports” explains that despite an operating budget of around $75 million, Stanford is looking at the possibility of cutting athletic programs to trim back the budget. This possibility is all the more dire for Stanford athletics which, as the alma mater of sport greats such as Tiger Woods, John Elway, and John McEnroe and recipient of 119 national championships, has long marketed itself as the “Home of Champions.”

Yet the December 2011 issue of the Chronicle, largely ignoring financial concerns regarding athletic programs, is different as it speaks to deeper, more pressing challenges: the mercurial relationship between school and sport which causes a divide that is at once rhetorical and material. With their bold headline, with close to one-fourth of the issue devoted to the topic, and with commentary by people such as Frank Deford, basketball Hall of Famer Oscar
Robertson, and president emeritus of the University of North Carolina system William C. Friday, the December issue signals a pivotal shift in the relationship between athletics and academics. Now faculty—here I read the *Chronicle* as a barometer of faculty sentiment—are not only concerned with pointing out what many perceive to be a gross level of revenue and expenditures in times of budget-belt tightening for academic departments. Instead, faculty are beginning to see athletics as an enterprise which erodes the academic integrity of higher education as evidenced by the *Chronicle*, recent scholarly and popular press publications devoted to athletics and academics, as well as the formation of reform minded groups such as the COIA, which I detail shortly.

However, what I find most curious is that this gnarled academic/athletic knot is nothing new. A quick search of texts devoted to charting the history of American colleges and universities reveals passages, or in the case of Frederick Rudolph’s *The American College and University: A History*, a whole chapter, devoted to the rise of intercollegiate athletics and the schism between practitioners of academics and practitioners of athletics. These histories repeatedly illustrate that as athletic departments and programs grew, slowly overshadowing academics, faculty members were notably silent.

**The Rise of College Sports and Disinterested Faculty**

In their infancy, college sports were student-run extracurricular endeavors (*A History* 178). Students organized the first football game between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869, and students coordinated the travel logistics when Michigan traveled to the northeast and squared off against Harvard, Princeton and Yale in the span of a week in 1881. Quickly college football
grabbed the attention of the public. In 1883, New York City was caught up in the thrill of a Thanksgiving match-up between Yale and Princeton. The fervor of student-run collegiate sports, free from the shackles of presidents, administrators, and boosters, engulfed the eastern half of the U.S.

Yet this freedom would not last much longer. John R. Thelin points to 1890-1910 as the two decades in which “the prototypical athletic association underwent a transformation [through a] professionalization of the staff, namely the hiring of an athletic director and coaching staff” (*A History* 178). This move toward professionalization altered the landscape of higher education.

In his chapter titled “The Rise of Football,” Rudolph contends,

> Therefore, when the apparatus of athletics grew too large and complex for student management; when the expenditure of much time and much money was required in the recruiting, coaching, feeding, and care of athletic heroes; when, indeed, all these things demanded a more efficient and perhaps more subtle touch, the alumni jumped to the opportunity which student ineffectiveness and faculty indifference gave them. (382-83)

Here is a missed opportunity for faculty. Yet our predecessor’s “indifference” paved the way for alumni and boosters to run the college sports associated with and a part of our schools. Out of the hands of the students and faculty showing indifference, athletics grew in size and scope, aiding in the marketing and branding of a university. Universities adopted colors proudly worn by supporters; mascots, some of which were fear-inducing (the Lions of Columbia; the Wolverines of Michigan), and some laugh-inducing (the Purple Cow of Williams College; the Terriers of Boston University), were enlisted to personify the school. And powerful individuals were put in place to enlarge athletics. Thelin describes the successful efforts by Walter Camp, Yale head
football coach from 1888 to 1892, to divert monies from smaller revenue sports, such as swimming and gymnastics, to football. Through these clever—some could say devious—tactics, Camp deployed an “entrepreneurial strategy that allowed a coach and athletics director to gain leverage over both student groups and academic officials” (*A History* 179). This strategy was adopted at the University of Chicago by Amos Alonzo Stagg, a disciple of Camp’s. Stagg became the athletic director in 1892 and through equally shrewd tactics, he procured himself a tenured faculty position, an administrative appointment as athletics director as well as football coach, a departmental budget exempted from customary internal review, and a direct line of reporting to the president (*A History* 179). On a more innocuous level, in 1893 Harvard created a salaried graduate manager of athletics in charge of the entire athletic program. It is these sly hiring practices which “added an important new dimension, and problem, to college and university administration” (Rudolph 384). As Stagg and others consolidated university power, faculty stood passively by largely ignoring this “problem” to which Rudolph refers.

Shady decisions by those putatively invested in facilitating the academic mission of a university led President Charles Eliot of Harvard in 1892 to declare the “foolish and pernicious expenditures on sports” to be “repulsive” (qtd. in Lucas 178). Eliot went so far as to call for the banishment of football at Harvard, perhaps more for the sheer brutality of the sport than its impact on academics. Yet for Eliot banishment was needed because the idea of athletics regulating itself was not an option: “It is childish,” Eliot determined, “to suppose that athletic authorities which have permitted football to become a brutal, cheating, demoralizing game can be trusted to reform it” (qtd. in Smith 206). However, football stayed; he could not bolster enough support even though President Harry Garfield of Williams College, echoing Eliot’s
concerns, said in 1908, “Here [at Williams College]…there is grave danger of departure from the essential idea of a college as distinguished from an institute of physical culture” (qtd. in Lucas 178). University presidents were sounding warning bells regarding athletics—which faculty largely ignored—and many Americans now believed a university’s mission was to field a football team (Rudolph 387). In 1928, Yale’s athletic association reported a gross revenue of $1,119,000 with a net profit of $384,500 (Rudolph 389). But the eyes of faculty were elsewhere. For example, professors in the English department at Yale were constructing basic writing classes to improve undergraduate writing. The following year, one of the first comprehensive accounts of intercollegiate athletics was compiled: the 1929 Carnegie Foundation Report. Specifically titled *American College Athletics Bulletin Number Twenty-Three*, the report was a detailed 347 page account and become “the canon…for reform proposals and policy analyses about the place of intercollegiate sports in American colleges and universities” (*Games* 13).

Here is one of the largest missed opportunities for faculty to have contributed to exposing gross athletic expenditure, shady decision-making, and increased levels of violence in intercollegiate athletics. Instead of being written by a member of the academic community, the report was compiled, composed, and released with Howard J. Savage as lead author. Savage was not a faculty member at a large eastern university struggling to balance a financially soaring athletic program with academics, but he was a staff member for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CFAT). The report focused largely on players’ safety, hygiene, and conduct and rules on the playing field with only, Savage confesses, “some attention…paid to the bearings of college athletics upon the principles and practice of education” (*American College Athletics* 3). Too concerned with crafting documents which reported on the state of our playing
field, faculty left the first comprehensive report on the state of intercollegiate athletics to a staff member at CFAT. While the report garnered widespread media attention (headlines in the *New York Times* shouted about the scandals that riddled college sports), the focus was not on ensuring that athletics would always fall under the academic purview of a university; instead the focus was on, among other things, the size of a playing field.

We missed positively influencing a pivotal moment in the creation of the modern athletic department. The history of American higher education with an eye toward the rise of athletics is peppered with incidents which should have tipped us off that something was amiss: head football coach and athletic director Stagg’s tenured faculty position and a departmental budget exempt from internal review; the increased number of injuries to students, students most assuredly in our predecessor’s classes, caused by playing unregulated sports; high net-profit posted by the Yale athletic association in 1928; and the muckraker 1929 Carnegie Foundation Report. But our eyes and ears were turned elsewhere. While concerned with legitimizing our work, we ignored the growing tensions between athletics and academics.

Today, despite record-setting budgets and revenue, and despite the scandals across the landscape of higher education as a result of college sports, we still largely ignore athletics. At the 2012 Conference on College Composition and Communication, the largest annual conference for the field of rhetoric and composition, the President of the NCAA, Dr. Mark Emmert, spoke on academic reform legislation to an audience of twenty or so at conference attended by upwards of 3,000 faculty and graduate students. And I don’t think this is indicative of only the field of rhetoric and composition. Janet H. Lawrence’s 2009 article titled “Faculty Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletics,” reports the results of over 2,000 completed email surveys by faculty at
twenty-three institutions. Near the conclusion of the article, Lawrence’s data reveal a disappointing result. While many believed their colleagues were interested in athletic governance issues, “when asked to prioritize a list of the thirteen issues confronting faculty governance bodies today, intercollegiate athletics places next to last in terms of importance” (109). The disconnect Lawrence describes is not shocking considering the long history we have of ignoring college sports. And now that college sports have exponentially grown in size, faculty finally want a say in the matter as exhibited by the piles of recent texts published on college sports and the increased attention college sports garner in publications such as the Chronicle, Insider Higher Ed, and Academe, the bi-monthly magazine of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). While thought-provoking and occasionally incendiary, these texts ultimately fail in their attempt to topple or even reform the force that is intercollegiate athletics. While I don’t believe we should focus on ridding athletics from our campuses, the focus on reform is much needed. To achieve proper reform what is most needed is a collective faculty voice and not disparate diatribes shot at college sports. The recent formation of the COIA provides this collective faculty voice.

The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics

Established in 2002 by James W. Earl at the University of Oregon, the faculty-led COIA aims to promote the comprehensive reform of college sports. Started as a grass-roots campaign among faculty senates at what was then called the Pacific-10 conference, the COIA strives to “help all stakeholders in college sports bring about comprehensive reform of the entire industry, for the sake of both college athletics and the university system” (Earl). Through connecting with
Bob Eno at the University of Indiana, Earl and the COIA have gone national, claiming membership at 59 of the 115 Football Bowl Subdivision schools as of the summer of 2012. Partnering with other governing bodies such as the Faculty Athletics Representative Association (FARA), the Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics (N4A), and the AAUP, the COIA has quickly positioned itself in the center of the debate surrounding intercollegiate athletic reform through policy papers, speeches at national conventions, and a steady presence in publications such as the Chronicle and Inside Higher Ed. While other reform-minded groups populate the landscape, the COIA is the most recent faculty response to what many perceive to be an ever-growing chasm between athletics and academics. The presence of a faculty voice in intercollegiate athletics has been sorely absent in previous reform undertakings and if lasting changes are to be made to the strained relationship between athletics and academics then faculty, the voice of a university, need to be heard.

Writing in Academe, Earl describes the activities on the University of Oregon’s campus that provided the impetus for the COIA:

Shortly [after I became the senate president], the athletics department announced a $90 million expansion of our stadium. I first learned about it from the local paper over breakfast one morning. Oddly, in the same issue, I read about the latest rounds of cuts to the university budget by the state legislature. I saw several things at once: a looming crisis in our academic budget; a second crisis in the relationship between academic and athletics . . . ; and a third crisis in faculty governance—for I could barely believe that the university would launch such a huge and expensive project without even informing the faculty.
These events became the center piece of a 2002 informal conversation between Earl and several senior faculty at the University of Oregon (Earl). The apprehension regarding what others saw as unregulated athletic spending stirred Earl to comment, “If we just let it continue, we’ll have a billion dollar athletic enterprise that owns us, the university and all the academic departments. It is supposed to be the other way around” (qtd. in Pennington). Earl and the senior faculty contacted faculty senate presidents at Pacific-10 schools to form a loosely affiliated grass-roots movement that would push for more faculty voice in athletic decisions. With the help of Eno, who at Indiana was living through the tempest that was legendary basketball coach Bob Knight, the COIA went national with the immediate goal of helping “faculty senates from coast to coast agree on clear, practicable, and meaningful reform of intercollegiate athletics” (Earl). Under the current co-leadership of John S. Nichols at Penn State and Michael Bowen at the University of South Florida, the COIA is an *ad hoc* group operating without a staff or budget. Membership is open to any FBS school upon a vote by said university’s faculty senate or equivalent, and no dues or obligation toward membership are required. The COIA maintains a presence on-line through their website, holds annual meetings, publishes regularly in the *Journal of Intercollegiate Athletics*, releases policy papers, and presents at national conferences. Originally designed to last only a few years, create practical reform steps and then disappear (Brown), the COIA has gained the respect of the NCAA through their practical suggestions and tireless patience. Additionally, the COIA has achieved staying power and effectiveness through peacefully approaching a polemical issue.

The COIA is run by faculty, not university presidents and members of the private sector (like the Knight Commission) or positioned as a liaison between the athletic department and
academics (like the FARA). This push toward faculty involvement in reforming college sports has been documented and argued for in recent publications. Writing in the *Chronicle*, Gerald S. Gurney, former president of the N4A, and Jerome C. Weber, both at the University of Oklahoma, provide brief, powerful suggestions for how we can be more involved in the reform of college sports including “gain[ing] more control over special admissions” and “work[ing] more forcefully through *independent faculty-based organizations*” (emphasis added). The COIA is one such response to Gurney and Weber’s call for “independent faculty-based organizations.” In a similar vein, Ohio University’s John R. Gerdy implores faculty to be “directly engaged” in academic reform of college sports:

> The faculty’s responsibility for defining and defending academic values requires them to become directly engaged in the issue [of academic reform in college sports]. . . .

> [W]ithout significant faculty attention and involvement, the critical mass necessary to force substantive change cannot be achieved . . . As the primary guardians of academic integrity, faculty must advance the dialogue about the appropriate role of athletics on campus. (“Athletic Victories”)

Furthermore, AAUP’s “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,” clearly states “The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and *those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process*” (The Academic Institution: The Faculty section; emphasis added).

Under this extracurricular umbrella of “aspects of student life” fall activities such as band, choir, academic clubs, the Greek system, intramurals, and intercollegiate athletics. Even former President of the NCAA Myles Brand understood the integral role of faculty in academic reform:
“Faculty involvement in the implementation of stricter [academic] standards—and faculty oversight of the academic integrity of the institution—is a critical piece of the reform puzzle.”

Taken together, then, I am in concert with these individuals who believe faculty should have, and should desire to have, a voice in all matters under the purview of a university including athletics. Reform needs to come largely from faculty, then, and not other bodies such as presidents and athletic staff members. Faculty of all stripes, and here I include adjuncts and graduate students, are the stewards of American higher education. For too long, we have idly stood on the sidelines, often cheering on our athletic programs, but too timid or disinterested to attempt to fit athletics into the academic mission, the mission, of our colleges and universities. From the professionalization of college sports, to the multi-billion dollar industry it is now, college sports has grown and continues to grow largely without faculty involvement. Thus, the COIA is a novel occurrence. Here is an opportunity for us to convince our faculty senates to vote for membership in a group committed to placing the academic mission of a university above the athletic mission, for faculty to have a voice on the lucrative stadium renovation, the chartered private plane for the head football coach, the high six-figure salary of the athletic director and other athletic administrative personnel. My call, at the close, is not for the banishment of college sports from our campuses. Indeed, I believe college sports have much to offer faculty. My call is for us to stop thinking that what occurs Saturday on the football field doesn’t impact what occurs Monday in the classroom. It does. And it is time for us to understand the reciprocal relationship between school and sports, athletics and academics, for the betterment of all parties involved.
Works Cited
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