

COMMENTARY

Palaima: Put academics before athletics

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It's the undergraduate education, stupid.

In the Feb. 21 *Daily Texan*, reporter Robert Kleeman gave his view of the Faculty Council meeting at which I raised five serious questions relating to the funding, managing and reporting on UT men's athletics; the quality of student education; the net results of a special program for faculty hires; and the absence of a major book store at the University. Responses to my questions from President Bill Powers, Vice President for Legal and Institutional Affairs Patricia Ohlendorf and Provost Sheldon Ekland-Olson were informative, but in most cases put happy faces on serious problems.

Concerning education in big-time commercialized sports, Ms. Ohlendorf gave anecdotes about academic stars who graduated. I know we have them. I was senior thesis adviser to Sean Braswell, a baseball-playing Rhodes Scholar.

But many normal athletes fail to complete their degrees because of demands put on them as athletes. And that concerns assistant athletics director Brian Davis.

Kleeman was right. Council members were silent, and I do "flail my arms" when speaking. Some council members perhaps were "suppressing laughter" about these matters. But the issues are no joke. Here is why.

A distinguished Dartmouth University professor who graduated from UT in 1963 remarks, "Most of us in higher education in the United States know all too well that it is the UT board of regents and its policies that over the years have kept UT Austin from attaining the excellence the University always talks about, but rarely achieves. It's an old fight. What's shameful about all this is that the same battles that J. Frank Dobie fought in the 1940s and '50s are being fought again today."

What are those battles about? When I was hired at UT Austin in 1986, we were ranked in the top 25 nationally in the most thorough and widely read standard annual evaluation of undergraduate education at national universities. Last year we were ranked 52nd. At the Faculty Council Meeting, President Powers spoke of our greatness. I may have flailed my arms as I pointed out that being lower than 79th percentile nationally did not qualify us as great.

That is why our former president, Larry Faulkner, appointed a commission of 125 leading figures in our state and nation in business, law, medicine, politics, the arts, humanities and sciences. Its

report is available online at <http://www.utexas.edu/com125/final.html>. Go read it. It stresses that undergraduate education must be improved. Our new president Bill Powers headed a task force to see what could be done. The Daily Texan is covering the campuswide debate.

Nowhere do these reports and discussions say that NCAA Athletics at UT Austin need more funding, bigger facilities, higher coaches' salaries.

Sports funding is not separate from overall funding. When our many skyboxes are rented out, each one has a \$44,000 to \$60,000 tax-deductible donation to an institution of higher education attached. Little to none of that money goes to higher education. If we encourage people to contribute to the sports programs through tickets and mandatory Longhorn Foundation fees, we are siphoning off millions of dollars that could be directed to improve student education. Every one of those sky box rental 'donations' could cover the full costs of an undergraduate year at UT for three students.

When UT regents and UT Austin administrators sign off on a plan to use donated funds to increase the multimillion-dollar salary of our football coach by about \$400,000, they are saying to the people of Texas, "This is where we want our money spent, not on improving education on the 40 Acres."

Lastly, when you see educational improvements on the 40 Acres, remember we are in a competition, nationally and internationally. As we improve, others are improving faster. Hence our lower rankings.

Laugh all you want. We are discussing the quality of your degrees and your futures.

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