

COMMENTARY

Palaima: It's all about athletics

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Austin American-Statesman Wednesday, May 10, 2006

http://www.statesman.com/search/content/editorial/stories/05/10palaima_edit.html

'College athletics, under the spur of commercialism, has become a monstrous cancer, which is rapidly eating out the moral and intellectual life of our educational institutions.'

- Upton Sinclair

This is happening at the University of Texas at Austin. And we are letting it. Why?

Ancient Athenian democracy worked as well as it did for four main reasons. Important positions of power and responsibility were entrusted to average citizens, not to the wealthy and well-connected. Office-holders were then overseen by a citizen assembly, which took its civic obligations seriously and had real power to enforce its views. Office-holders knew that at the end of their terms they would undergo a euthuna, or serious public scrutiny where they had to explain their actions and their use of public money. And records were made public in permanent inscriptions.

At UT-Austin, the situation is quite different. At the top, the board of regents is made up of prominent civic, professional and business leaders, appointed by the governor. They make major policy and resource decisions throughout the UT system. They see the big picture - and one of the biggest things they see is Longhorn football.

The regents receive life-time season tickets to football games and other sporting events, according to recent articles in the *American-Statesman*. For football alone, single tickets and parking perks are worth thousands of dollars in waivers of the mandatory donations to higher education required of mere mortals who want to buy such tickets. The chairman of the regents, James Huffines, explains that regents have to engage in UT's athletic, artistic, social and ceremonial events. He is right. But they also should set up regular formal talks with faculty to learn about critical teaching and research needs.

Intercollegiate athletics get little serious scrutiny. Information about revenues and expenses is hidden in budgets that are not studied by any independent faculty committee. For seven years now, the Faculty Budget Advisory Committee and the provost have not reviewed the UT Intercollegiate Athletics budget. In 1999, after the last major stadium building project siphoned away resources from UT's academic mission (by delaying the building of laboratories and repairs to academic facilities), the faculty council and the president approved steps intended to increase faculty input into major athletics building projects. But these have proved toothless.

The academic progress of athlete-students is hidden behind the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the NCAA's new arcane rating systems. When serious questions are asked, no one demands real answers. For example, Patti Ohlendorf, the vice president who oversees

intercollegiate athletics, was asked in the Faculty Council why the men's and women's basketball teams had average SAT scores of 873 and 883, respectively - nearly 200 points lower than the averages for men and women athletes and a full 350 points lower than the overall student scores. Her answer: "You have very low numbers of persons on those teams."

No one said, "Say what?" And no one asked about the abysmal performance of male athletes across the board: below 20th percentile nationally in baseball, basketball, swimming, track - even golf.

Articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education and the Statesman highlighted how a SWAT team of tutors and advisers worked to restore basketball player P.J. Tucker's academic eligibility. Being a gifted athlete from an early age, Tucker was given little incentive to study. He took the SAT six times before getting a grade marginally sufficient for UT. Since regaining his eligibility, he has completed one semester as a "successful" student.

This is laudable, but the real lesson here is sad. The corrupting influence of commercialized big-time college sports permeates all levels of our educational system. Many young P.J. Tuckers get away with focusing on sports, effectively throwing away their first 12 years of education. The NCAA then forces universities to perform educational triage so that the lucky few pass courses of unknown content and rigor.

Why doesn't the men's athletics council provide oversight? Professor Jack Gilbert, associate dean for academic affairs in the School of Natural Sciences, has long been concerned about the effects of Intercollegiate Athletics on UT's educational and cultural mission. "The Board of Regents appoints two members to each of the UT-Austin athletics councils, not to athletics councils anywhere else in the UT System," he says. This, he believes, is "symptomatic of the unique position the UT athletics program seems to have with the regents" for whom "big-time athletics is the be all, end all for this campus."

Gilbert further explains that, like the regents, "members of the athletics councils accept gratuities (free tickets, for example) to athletics events." He believes, as I do, that this creates a clear conflict of interest and compromises their ability to make independent judgments that might run counter to the desires of the athletics programs. In spring 2003, Gilbert proposed a resolution that faculty members on the athletics councils not accept any tickets. Members of the women's athletics council approved this concept. The men's representatives did not.

Gilbert isn't the only one who sees what is going on. But he is one of the few who is trying to make a difference. Still, if he holds his breath waiting for real reform, we'll be reading his obituary. After all, the situation was already bad when Upton Sinclair wrote his comprehensive study of U.S. higher education - in 1923.

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