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## NCAA Panel Disses the Faculty

By [Tom Palaima](#)

Back in January 2005, Myles Brand, president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, commissioned the [NCAA Presidential Task Force on the Future of Division I Intercollegiate Athletics](#). The task force consisted of 50 university and college presidents and chancellors. It was charged with addressing, *mutatis mutandis*, the two major problems [now under investigation](#) by the House Ways and Means Committee of the United States Congress: (1) the financing of intercollegiate athletics programs; and (2) "the danger of cultural isolation of student-athletes from the intellectual purposes and academic values of our universities." The NCAA panel worked for 18 months, during which leaders of two of its key subcommittees retired. One of them was Larry Faulkner, the well-regarded now-former president of my own institution, the University of Texas at Austin.

The report is 64 pages long, but you need not be intimidated by its length. Mimicking the expensive sleekness of the Bible-thick media guides that high-dollar NCAA sports programs like the University of Texas at Austin produce yearly for all their major sports, the report has 13 glossy, full-page photographs of athlete-students either competing in sports events or studying among Greek columns, library stacks, laboratory flasks or computer terminals. Four pages give a photographic rogues' gallery of smiling presidents and chancellors.

By my estimate, the report proper, with its few statistical charts and figures, runs about 32 pages. In its present form, it is a slick sports brochure, not a serious study.

I concentrate here, though, on the report's contents, and particularly its assessment of the role of faculty in contributing to or solving the problems it addresses. Frankly, I cannot believe that the man I knew and worked with when he was president at UT Austin, Larry Faulkner, supported what the task force has to say about faculty. Paraphrase or minimal quotation would raise suspicions of distortion on my part. So let me give rather full quotations.

*Critical to the future of re-establishing institutional accountability for intercollegiate athletics is the underdeveloped potential for informed faculty engagement in support of presidential leadership. Hampering such engagement for decades has been uninformed, biased faculty members who attack athletics unfairly. (P.*

15)

*Further hampering the ability for faculty to engage athletics issues and support presidents in the leadership of college sports is the inevitable tension between the horizontal culture of faculty as a peer-driven, loosely organized body and the hierarchical, top-down nature of campus administrations. Nonetheless, organizations designed by and for faculty — and both old and new — will be instrumental in diminishing the effect of this tension. (P. 15)*

*Faculty athletics representatives and faculty senates must work together to bring about a new relationship between those charged with setting the standards for academic achievement and those who guide the course for intercollegiate athletics, and they must do so from positions of well-informed members of the academy itself. (P. 17)*

*To play a productive role, faculty members must provide informed advice, and they must make the effort to understand the intercollegiate athletics enterprise — the facts of the matter — and not merely accept pre-existing biases. Faculty members would never tolerate superficial, uninformed pronouncements in their own disciplines, and they should not do so when they are engaged in making recommendations about intercollegiate athletics. (P. 33)*

*The faculty athletics representative (FAR) plays a key role in this regard. The FAR on each campus is the faculty member best positioned to appreciate both the dynamics and problems of intercollegiate athletics, and he or she is most likely to understand student-athletes' academic well-being. (P. 33)*

Let us start with one major point. The conspicuous problems that the task force addresses arose under the authority of college and university presidents, chancellors, regents and boards of trustees. These problems relate to institutional goals and priorities, educational principles and values, fund-raising methods and resource management. They are so egregious that Rep. William Thomas, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, in his official letter to Myles Brand on October 2, easily formulated 25 detailed, multi-part questions for the NCAA to answer, just for starters.

Concerned faculty have been asking the same kinds of questions since the 1920s, with the best of motives. We care deeply about our students and about the western tradition of learning.

Admittedly, I am viewing this report from the perspective of a professor devoted to research and teaching. I have 20 years of experience co-existing with what was recently named the No. 1 NCAA sports program in the nation. If faculty were to have a bias against NCAA sports anywhere, it should be at the University of Texas at Austin, where colossal and costly new sports facilities house the NCAA Division I football champions, a Sweet 16 basketball team, and a perennial contender for the College World Series title. But this is not the case.

The faculty council at UT Austin appointed committees in 1993 and 1997-99 that identified many of the very problems the NCAA Presidential Task Force examined. These committees gathered accurate information and proposed sensible solutions in a cooperative spirit that still prevails on our campus. Our faculty did not lobby to increase coaches' salaries to the levels they have now reached. Our presidents and regents signed off on those increases.

The head football coach at UT now makes a base salary of \$2.55 million per year. By comparison, the entire instructional budget (faculty salaries and other teaching-related expenses) of UT's number-one ranked petroleum engineering department is only \$2 million. The average salaries of the 11 assistant football coaches last year easily outstripped the average salaries of full professors in our law school, the highest paid full

professors at our institution.

Faculty did not have the authority to stop the recruitment of a men's basketball team whose average SAT score is 370 points below the current student body average. No faculty committee at UT Austin proposed constructing an academic environment for football players that sequesters them in their own high-tech study facility with their own tutors and advisers and supervisors, and still leaves them, year in and year out, trailing the entire Big 12 Conference and most of the nation in six-year graduation rates — 40 percent is the official NCAA calculation.

In 1996-98, at a time when the Texas Legislature was sharply curtailing its yearly appropriations to the UT system, UT embarked on a \$100 million stadium expansion project that expended lots of valuable political capital. It was pushed through by Chancellor Bill Cunningham, who was, you guessed it, a former president of UT Austin.

Don't take my biased faculty word for it. Take the word of ex-chancellor Hans Mark. Mark, who preceded Cunningham, resisted for years the strong lobbying of a group on the Board of Regents who wanted UT athletics to go big-time in the Big 12.

As mentioned earlier, the UT faculty council appointed a committee in 1997-99 to look into many of the same issues regarding NCAA athletics that Congress and the NCAA Presidential Task Force are now looking at. The so-called Wright Committee made reasonable suggestions about how faculty could be effective in balancing academics and athletics and controlling costly sports building programs. Nonetheless, last spring a new \$150 million stadium expansion project (now further increased to \$178 million) was approved by the regents and by President Faulkner with no appreciable faculty input.

Our current president is trying to follow through on Faulkner's ambitious plan to add 300 faculty, in order to lower UT's extremely high student/faculty ratio. To do this, we need more office space, classrooms and laboratories on the central campus, where space was already at a premium in the mid-'90s.

Disregarding the academic side of institutional planning, the \$100 million expansion project authorized by Cunningham and the Board of Regents in 1996-98 converted a multi-use stadium (football, track and field, high school athletics events) into a football-only facility. Precious space was then used to build an outdoor football practice field, an air-conditioned indoor football practice field, a track-and-field stadium, and a deluxe athletics center.

Faculty were not consulted about this questionable use of resources, especially scientists who have to commute from central campus to laboratories at a distant satellite facility. Nor were UT's approximately 35,000 undergraduates. Faculty would love to accommodate their pressing need for more courses offered during prime time. But existing classrooms are booked solid even during non-peak hours.

The NCAA Presidential Task Force criticizes faculty for bias, distortion, superficial uninformed pronouncements, inability to work within a hierarchical structure, lack of effort to understand intercollegiate athletics, and lack of cooperation with the faculty athletics representatives (FAR's) who are "best positioned to appreciate both the dynamics and problems of intercollegiate athletics."

Their criticisms about faculty unwillingness or inability to understand the nature and realities of NCAA programs are ironic, given that the NCAA Web site lists 15 membership categories including president/CEO, athletics director, current NCAA student/athlete, coach and marketing/public relations/development. But it recognizes no category for faculty, professor, teacher or educator.

The Task Force should provide documentation for the serious charge that faculty abandon their professional scholarly ethics when taking up matters pertaining to NCAA athletics. Such statements are what the late Mayor Daley of Chicago once called malicious “insinundo.” We may all call them what they are: false.

At UT Austin, faculty are reduced by the Handbook of Operating Procedures and Regental Rules to a minor, advisory role in making decisions about large-scale building projects, budgets and salary structures, and the academic side of NCAA athletics. The faculty council itself is marginalized in regard to academics and athletics. Oversight falls to separate Men’s and Women’s Athletics Councils. These committees have special members appointed by the regents and single yearly faculty representatives chosen by the president from a slate of candidates proposed by the faculty council. Like the FAR’s, whom the NCAA Presidential Task Force hails as sources of unbiased perspective, these positions traditionally go to sports boosters who enjoy the perks and insider status their appointments bring them. The results, again, are clear.

The report of the NCAAA Presidential Task Force on the Future of Division I Intercollegiate Athletics makes clear why problems with big-time college sports, identified, according to the report, as long ago as 1915, have never been solved. College and university presidents and chancellors are supposed to set agendas that support the noble social aims of their institutions. They have the power to prevent minor local problems from growing into national issues. They also have the authority to mobilize reform at their own institutions.

In regard to the problems with NCAA athletics, they have failed seriously in all three of these areas. And by going out of their way to blame faculty, the 50 presidents and chancellors of the NCAA task force missed an opportunity to unite with faculty to solve problems that our nation’s elected leaders want us to solve.

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*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/views/2006/11/27/palaima>.*

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