

UTSA is throwing a Hail Mary pass

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By Tom Palaima - Special to the *Express-News*

As a representative of the Faculty Council of the University of Texas at Austin on the national Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) and Big XII representative on the COIA national steering committee, I have long studied the relationship between NCAA athletics programs and the academic mission of state universities.

Although the horse is already out of the barn, it is worth making a few points pertinent to this debate.

First, whatever the financial plan proposed by UTSA administrators to the regents, heavy odds are that going big-time Division I football will add big-time to the costs of education at UTSA. The most recent study by the NCAA (of the economically flush years 2004-2006) proves that only 17 of the more than 300 Division I athletic programs earned a net profit. Sixteen of those 17 programs in the black fielded "successful" teams in the Football Bowl Subdivision.

Half of all revenues came from ticket sales and sports-booster donations. Trademark revenues (sales of sports souvenirs) also bring in big money for winning teams.

In the current economic climate, it was reported last week that even mighty Ohio State University has had trouble selling its ticket allotments for January's Fiesta Bowl, and sales of trademark items are so bad that stores in Columbus and around Ohio have not even bothered ordering many items that normally were bestsellers.

Second, let's consider the student referendum in 2007, in which 4,600 students out of 28,000 voted (16 percent turnout), 3,000 of whom favored going big-time in football at a cost now of \$240 more per year for every full-time student.

If you are managing your money - if you have any - in December 2008 the same way you were managing it in 2007, raise your hand. No one? Good.

In my opinion, given the dire economic circumstances we are facing as a nation and locally, the UT System Board of Regents should have felt morally obliged to require that the UTSA administration take another referendum to see whether students, or their parents, now want to part so easily with \$960 over four years as they did in 2007.

On an issue with financial implications for everyone enrolled, why not ensure a close to 100 percent turnout by setting up a system whereby the vote could have been taken during registration? It is easy electronically to require that no one could register without at least reading the proposal and making a quick choice to vote yes, no or abstain. Or the administration could have circulated the ballots via classes as an exercise in civic responsibility.

Finally, the Doug-Flutie effect on my alma mater - Boston College - is cited as one way in which a school could rise to prominence via its sports programs. Indeed, my knowledgeable colleague Michael Granof, an accounting professor at UT-Austin, remarks that the extra fees might be worth it for UTSA students if it raises the visibility of the institution.

Big-time football success can instill pride and school spirit. But keep in mind that the Flutie pass on Nov. 23, 1984, is remembered as the Hail Mary pass because it was so rare that it required that the Mother of our Savior intercede to make the miracle happen. I was a student at BC from 1969-1973. I can guarantee you that the feelings that my friends and I had for BC then and feel for our alma mater now would be just as strong if the Blessed Mother had turned a deaf ear.

BC opened its great Tip O'Neill Library in 1984, named after the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives who graduated from BC in 1936. It was built with donations from loyal alums and admirers of O'Neill. BC had already achieved national institutional prominence, based on academics, well before Flutie became a name in sports-minded households.

UTSA is banking on a one-in-a-million chance that it will become a seventeen-in-three-hundred success. On Earth or in heaven, these are long and foolish odds.