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Barack Obama and the International Education Bowl

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By Tom Palaima and Nathan Tublitz

President-elect Barack Obama has proposed replacing the Bowl Championship Series games with an eight-team playoff to determine the national college football champion in Division I-A. If his administration really has the time and inclination to deal with crises other than the national economic picture and our health care system, we would encourage him to focus on something more important than football: how American institutions of higher education are faring in the international education bowl.

Our national education game plan is in fact linked to our economic future. One crucial factor is how our colleges and universities raise and spend their money, for academics and for sports.

As two concerned members of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, a consortium of university faculty senates concerned about sports issues, we offer here our opinions drawn from our long up-close and personal perspectives on how big-time sports has affected the academic missions at our two universities: the University of Oregon and the University of Texas at Austin. U.T.'s athletics director is (in)famous for declaring its program the "Joneses" of NCAA athletics, with which all others must keep up. Longhorns Inc, as Texas Monthly called Texas athletics in its November issue, outspends all but a few competitors. It is one of the few college sports programs to make a profit. The University of Oregon has also moved into the top 25 in Division I-A football. We discuss the costs to both institutions below.

In September 2006, the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education painted a jumbotron-scale picture of the failings and needs of our colleges and universities in math, science, engineering and even reading and writing. The final report, ironically entitled A Test of Leadership, highlighted a serious decline in U.S. student academic performance compared to other countries. Undeterred by these alarming data, university leaders have increased athletic spending, while academic programs suffer.

Simply put, in balancing the institutional priorities of athletics and academics, many university presidents are failing our country. But they are not alone. The University of Texas System Board of Regents, which oversees U.T., has authorized spending a quarter of a billion dollars on stadiums, practice fields and sports arena enhancements since 2003. Other Texas universities spent \$750 million during this same time on sports facilities.

"So what?" you might say. "U.T. athletics is making money." We might say this too, if winning football games were the real business of our educational institutions and made a positive contribution to our country's future. The one competition that matters internationally is education. And big-time sports spending carries an educational cost.

It is noteworthy and undoubtedly a relief to our president-elect that college sports is one American big business not looking for a federal bailout. But this is not because NCAA programs across the country are making money. The most recent NCAA study reports that only 17 of the 1,200+ NCAA athletic programs earned a net profit in the economically healthy period between 2004 and 2006. In 2006, 99 Division I-A programs ran deficits. The average was \$8.9 M. Since most universities cannot run deficits, the money for big-time sports spending comes from institutional academic budgets.

Second, universities already get a big handout from the federal government. By making skybox rental fees and mandatory donations for ticket-purchasing privileges tax deductible, our government actually encourages universities to build stadiums and arenas laden with luxury sky-boxes and other kinds of preferred seating. That's where the big "tax-deductible" money is.

Wealthy sports boosters like Phil Knight (the University of Oregon) and T. Boone Pickens (Oklahoma State University) can write off their gifts of \$100 million or more to sports programs as donations to higher education.

Congressional committees have examined these loopholes recently and not made any moves towards changing them. However, in fall 2007, the daughter of the late U.S. Rep J.J. (Jake) Pickle, who authored the original Pickle Amendment that created the loopholes, was appalled to learn of the extravagant spending of the University of Texas athletics department. She wrote the Austin American-Statesman that her father never intended that "our sports programs" would "eclipse the purpose of the University of Texas."

There are also other hidden educational costs to sports spending. U.T.'s sprawling sports facilities take up precious building space on campus, even as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has told the university that it needs an additional 1.4 million square feet of classroom and laboratory facilities to give its 50,000 students a satisfactory education. At the University of Oregon, 60 percent of all campus building projects in the past 10 years have been for intercollegiate athletics, including a new, palatial \$200 million basketball arena financed by state bonds.

Then there is the effect on "wannabe" institutions. The UT Board of Regents on December 18 approved a plan for the University of Texas at San Antonio to start a big-time football program by 2016. The plan involves doubling student athletics fees at the 28,000-student institution to \$480 annually in order to generate about 70 percent of the conservatively estimated \$18 million yearly budget the football program will require. Meanwhile the Texas-San Antonio library reports that it is still occupying the same space it did when the campus opened in 1973 and has inadequate room for its print collection, computers, and student study areas.

Some university leaders have taken salary cuts in response to the fiscal crisis enveloping our universities. But they have not touched the compensation of big-time sports coaches. In November, UT's head baseball coach received a 25 percent raise, to \$1 million, and an assistant football coach was designated heir apparent to the head coach's \$3 million position. His salary will be raised in January 112 percent - that's not a typo - to \$900,000, 50 percent more than UT's president makes. Remember, that's for an assistant coach.

Outdoing the Joneses for once, the University of Oregon anointed one of its assistant football coaches a head-coach-in-waiting, too, at \$7 million over 5 years. Meanwhile Oregon, like many other universities, cut its academic budget this fall, resulting in fewer courses, larger class sizes and decreased student services.

Oregon and UT played in bowl games this year. What was the cost of getting there? One cost is that the football players on their teams are "bottom-feeders" in the annual Higher Ed Watch's Academic BCS Rankings, based on their abysmal graduation rates and their poor graduation ratio between black and white players. The second cost is in dollars that could be going to academic needs. UT's athletics budget works out to \$244,684 per year for each of its 511 athlete-students, but its official student-related expenditures are \$11,344 for each student. Oregon spends \$108,000 per year for each athlete-student and \$9,222 for each enrolled student. The stats are similar at other Division 1 NCAA institutions.

Other countries are beating us in education by wisely using their financial resources not for sports entertainment, but on classrooms, libraries and laboratories. American children are less well educated and have fewer career opportunities than their parents. They have less hope.

Creating more hope is what Barack Obama is all about. Let us hope he uses his influence to get Congress to close the loopholes that have perverted our higher educational priorities, and that he directs our new secretary of education to work seriously on getting university leaders across the country to focus on the one bowl game that truly matters: education.

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