

# Palaima: Charlie Strong's core values should match the rest of UT

---

**By Tom Palaima**

Posted Oct 25, 2014 at 6:00 PM

Austin American-Statesman

<http://www.statesman.com/news/news/opinion/palaima-charlie-strongs-core-values-should-match-t/nhrj3/>

There are many occasions for us to wonder how or why people in positions of authority make the decisions, adopt the policies or say the things that they say, without their advisers offering forceful objections beforehand or anyone offering criticism at the time or after the fact.

There are many reasons for this. It is not easy to speak frankly to people who hold and use power. Few leaders follow Abraham Lincoln's sound policy of having as his Cabinet a team of rivals who naturally viewed issues differently than he did and said so. It is also hard to dig down to underlying assumptions or to see hidden implications.

Praise has been heaped on University of Texas at Austin head football coach Charlie Strong for adopting and enforcing a strict set of five core values for student athletes on the UT football team. In late September, Strong spoke forthrightly in person to the commissioner of the National Football League, Roger Goodell, about National Collegiate Athletic Association programs sending "players with questionable character" to the NFL where the mix of bad character and lots of money "accentuates the problem."

Yet the very core values that Strong has enunciated indicate how out of synch big-time college sports programs are with the cultural values of the educational institutions with which they are, in some views, only loosely affiliated.

Imagine, if you will, a general pool of non-athlete prospective students who have expressed interest in enrolling at UT, or Stanford University or Stephen F. Austin State University.

During a campus visit, these would-be students and their parents listen intently to the dean of students or the university president or the head of the physics department. What they hear is this: "Our core values are the same as Charlie Strong's. If your sons and daughters come here, they will learn to treat women with respect, be honest, and no stealing, drugs or guns." There is

a good chance those students and their parents would probably think that they had accidentally found their ways into a youth correctional facility.

There is a night and day difference between the UT football program's core values and the core values that UT promotes for the other 75,000 students, faculty and staff: "The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community."

Far from finding Strong's core values laudable, I find them troubling, even demeaning to the true student athletes in his program. They point out a Grand Canyon separation in attitudes and outlooks between students and faculty on one side and student athletes and coaches on the other.

Strong's idea that somehow bad character is reinforced, or at least not corrected, only during the few years — often less than four — when student athletes are actively participating in NCAA programs is also questionable. The corruption begins when NCAA recruiters start contacting prospective athletes even before they are in high school. Young athletes start losing touch with reality from that point right on through to when national television networks broadcast as events of major importance where a high school athlete during his senior year has decided to "go to college."

The disconnection between big-time NCAA athletics and serious higher education is countenanced and reinforced by the policies of the NCAA and of the colleges and universities. At the University of Texas at Austin, in response to pressure from the Texas Higher Education Board, the Board of Regents, the Texas State Legislature and other state political leaders, there is now an emphasis on students graduating within four years of matriculation. UT-Austin has even appointed Vice Provost David Laude to serve as a special "graduation czar" with a hefty \$291,000 salary to enforce policies that will increase our four-year graduation rates.

Yet the academic success or failure of athletics programs has been and still is determined on a six-year time schedule. Student athletes satisfy the requirements of the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate if they have finished about 80 percent of their course work within four years with grade point averages of 2.0. Compare this low satisfactory GPA to the average GPA for all students at UT-Austin, around 3.2, and we can see how the Academic Progress Rate's emphasis on maintaining sports eligibility is a disincentive regarding academic achievement.

Our colleges and universities are homes to learning. Let's think of ways that, for athletes in major revenue sports, they can be much more than houses of correction.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas.