

Palaima: Don't let NCAA sports overshadow students, faculty

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By Tom Palaima - Special to the *Austin American-Statesman*

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New University of Texas President Gregory L. Fenves in his inaugural address last week spoke of UT's NCAA athletics programs as a gateway to the university. It might be for those who are unconcerned or unaware about what is happening inside the gate, but many long-term faculty and staff might propose that Fenves embark on building other gateways and give them the attention and support long lavished on our major commercial sports entertainment enterprise.

During my 30 years at UT, NCAA athletics has caused distractions and spent money profligately in ways unparalleled by any other unit of the university. While serving as departmental chair, on UT's Faculty Council and on the national Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, or COIA, I observed four UT presidents, four provosts and many faculty committees wasting time and resources on athletics that would truly better our world if directed at academic and cultural programs or UT's sorely underfunded libraries.



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During my COIA years (2008-2011), two NCAA presidents, directors of three major football conferences and the U.S. secretary of education stressed the need for independent faculty oversight of student-athlete academics, sports budgets and the ethics of NCAA programs. During my COIA report to the Faculty Council in Spring 2011, I pleaded, not for the first time, of the then-provost and president that they take steps to meet this need. They took no steps.

In the last 20 years, hundreds of millions of dollars have been lavished on stadia and skyboxes. In the last three years, millions of dollars have been paid to a fired football coach and a fired athletics director. The amount reportedly paid to the ex-athletics director not to work for UT would cover the recent average merit raise pools for the 15 professors of classics at UT for about 150 years. If endowed at 3 percent pay out, it would cover the standard meager raises for four departments of our size for eternity. Right now it could help

our libraries acquire new specialized research journals, instead of contemplating cutting those we get.

UT proclaims that we start things that change our world. Yet we continue to violate two sound principles enunciated by the NCAA and its leaders: No student athlete should spend more than 20 hours per week on athletics and no university should have separate fund-raising organizations for academics and athletics.

The sports program hides the poor academic record of athletes in the major men's sports behind the legitimate (for other purposes) protections of the Federal Education Right to Privacy Act and the NCAA's gimmicked Graduation Success Rates and Academic Progress Rate statistics. In summer 2014, the dedicated academics adviser for men's football, Brian Davis, was fired, despite promoting independence of thought among the student athletes he cared for. UT football achieved the first perfect Academic Progress Rate score in school history under Brian.

I remember the moral disgust many of us felt when the football team held practice in the afternoon on Sept. 28, 2010, a mere eight hours after a likable and respected sophomore named Colton Tooley fired random shots at nobody on campus with an AK-47 and then killed himself in the Perry Castañeda Library.

Last Tuesday, I came back to campus at 7 p.m. to work on research and my courses. The UT Tower glowed burnt orange. I wondered, what sports team has won a championship? What a Pavlovian thought!

Later I received three emails from the president's office. I thought they might contain ideas about the new directions and policies our soon-to-be-inaugurated president would be setting. Instead they each contained news that no one doing what a university should be doing needed to know. The high-salaried athletics director was being fired. This vital presidential message was addressed not to UT's devoted researchers and teachers or our dedicated staff, but to Dear Longhorns.

We who make UT work are not bovids. We are focused on educating students who can, if kept from distractions and not misled by messages equating education with earning power, be a breed apart.

The Chicago-based Seldoms dance group last week passed through a gateway to UT-Austin. They brought into classes their magnificent work "Power Goes," based on the life and good works of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. And they opened gates in the minds of our students.

Mr. President, build and maintain these gateways.

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