COMMENTARY

Athletics Cannot Be Just Extracurricular

BY ERIANNE A. WEIGHT, JOSEPH N. COOPER, STEPHEN VAISEY, AND TAMARA CLEGG

THE GOVERNANCE of college football is broken from top to bottom. The NCAA handles rules, litigation, and enforcement, yet does not formally operate the College Football Playoff or receive any revenue from the sport. Athletic conferences follow the cash, leading to conference alignments that abandon regional rivalries in pursuit of more lucrative TV markets and at the expense of athlete travel time. Universities advertise the educational value of college sport, yet do not facilitate for-credit structures that reflect those supposed values. When organizations like these are flailing, it is wise to examine the mission and core values that drive them.

What are the values of college sport? Until a few years ago, most people would have said "amateurism." College sport in the United States meant amateur athletes competing for the love of the game and a "free" education. Yet the ideal of amateurism developed in 19th-century England as a way for social elites to exclude the working class from athletic competition. After more than 100 years of the NCAA's amateur model, the average 2024 base salary of head football coaches in the Southeastern conference was around $8 million, and the highest-paid state employee in 43 U.S. states is a college coach. Now, after dozens of legal battles and Supreme Court intervention, NCAA athletes have the right, for the first time, to their own name, image, and likeness (NIL).

Why was amateurism so entrenched for so long? Social class and race were probably important factors. Within today's four most visible Division I conferences, 18 percent of athletic directors and 25 percent of head football coaches identify as members of underrepresented-minority groups, compared with 66 percent of football athletes. That stark difference between "management" and "labor" mirrors other sectors of society, reflecting a history of race and class stratification in the American economy. Through the 2021 NIL rulings and athlete entrepreneurship, we are beginning to redress this economic exploitation. Athletes can now earn their market value through endorsements and may soon be sharing revenue, moving us one step closer to a fair distribution of profits. Perhaps amateurism is not, and never should have been, a defining value of college sport.

Another candidate for the core value of college sport is its "educational purpose," often touted by the NCAA and its member institutions. There is, in fact, good evidence that transformative education happens through college sport. But none of it, ironically, counts toward an athlete's degree requirements. Why do we ask athletes to balance two nearly full-time jobs while dancers, artists, scientists, and musicians are allowed to major in their passion as they prepare for post-graduation careers? The difference seems obvious to many: The pursuit of athletic excellence isn't scholarly, and we shouldn't count it as a legitimate part of a university education. And yet music, dance, art, theater, and business were once regarded as "non-scholarly," but have since become essential components of the academy. What seems obvious has changed quite a bit.

The marginalization of athletics persists because age-old biases help determine what

we deem legitimate educational pursuits. Black men compose less than 3 percent of full-time undergraduates in the major Division I conferences, while they make up the majority of athletes in the big-money sports of football and basketball. We don't see sports as scholarly because we don't see the people who participate in them as scholarly.

It is not the athletes' academic ability or intelligence that leads to those biases. If many elite athletes seem detached from our classes, perhaps it is because — despite the lip service of mission statements — athletics and academics are often at odds with one another. Elite athletes know their institutions value them for their athletic talents far more than for their abilities beyond the stadium or court. They detach from classes to pursue excellence because this is their only chance to have a career in the field they love. That same passion is shared by many painters, violinists, dancers, and aspiring entrepreneurs. The difference is that we accept their passions as academic. Artists or actors can earn academic credit while refining their craft, whereas athletes generally cannot.

Why has sport not found a path toward educational legitimacy? There are many likely reasons, but we believe race-based perceptions of academic ability have been turned into institutionalized practices masked as objective, colorblind policies. These have the effect of marginalizing athletics as a legitimate academic subject. This justifies a system that exploits a mostly Black work force and benefits mostly white coaches and administrators. We argue that reform is needed in both design and intent at the institutional level.

To start, we need to acknowledge the current structure of college sports as a clear case of institutional racism. We need to rebuild athletics on a new vision of the collegiate athlete, one that integrates athletics directly into the academy and recognizes that education requires the time and mental space to explore, ponder, and develop within and

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beyond athletic spaces. Our exile of athletics to the "extracurricular" makes that nearly impossible. We need to allow our athletes time to immerse themselves in the study of sport, which would include physiology, history, analytics, sociology, nutrition, psychology, technology, law, business, agriculture, education, and biomechanics. This will not only yield a rich educational experience similar in structure to music, dance, theater, and business, but will also lead to a new generation of skilled coaches, practitioners, and analysts that matches the demographics of those they teach and lead.

NIL and revenue sharing are long-overdue economic rights and steps in the right direction. But if we want reform in college sport — if we want to fix this broken system that brings so much joy, hope, and entertainment — we need to start by examining our values and aligning the development and well-being of those who drive the system with supporting organizational structures and practices.

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