

The Present Status of the NCAA

NIELS THOMPSON

University of Texas

The long range future of athletics will be significantly influenced by the ability of the NCAA and educational institutions to integrate the special objectives of athletic programs with other overall objectives of the institutions and of society as a whole. Institutions and groups within them often focus their attention inwardly dealing with questions of internal management and their own particular interests. Less emphasis is given to the interests of other groups and of society in general.

This seems to be true for the athletic program of the colleges and universities which make up the NCAA and also for NCAA itself. It is particularly true for universities in which the athletic programs are relatively autonomous. Autonomy tends to develop when little attention is given to the articulation of a philosophy for major athletic programs consistent with the educational philosophy of the institution. Some administrators feel compelled to apologize to intellectuals for athletics, while others shrug and take a very pragmatic stance. In some cases they withdraw, acting as if problems do not exist. Too rarely have they carefully explained and defended the objectives of a major program. A clarification of objectives can lead to a better program and also strengthen accountability and control.

Every educational institution has two sets of objectives. One familiar set deals with what it seeks to do in serving students. A second equally valid set deals with attempts to serve society broadly, going beyond current students to a large constituency—the state, the nation, society — however it may be defined.

The athletic program may also have two sets of objectives. It can serve the objectives of the participants—the athletes. It can also serve the interest of other students and the general public — the spectators, the constituency, the society.

A university maintains an athletic program not just to provide training for professional athletes but also to provide a training experience for future coaches and physical education instructors. An intangible but very positive benefit generally is the cohesiveness in the student body resulting from athletic events. They are among the most unifying actions on campus, as illustrated in campus after campus threatened by division and unrest among the student body. Further, it is seen that ex-students interested in athletics while in college become staunch supporters in later years.

A persuasive and logical case can and should be made for an athletic program based on societal objectives. Like research, athletics can be somewhat autonomous in its organization and financed from outside, but, like research, it can and should be regarded as an integral part of the mission of the institution.

For major “society-serving” programs the NCAA would serve as a key agent in relating to the public. The NCAA establishes the playing rules for various sports, negotiates TV contracts, adopts regulations designed to minimize competitive advantages, conducts championships and acts as the enforcement agency. The enormous dollar “pay-off” possible for institutions in major sports creates a serious threat of destructive, cut-throat competition in recruiting, illicit financial aid, et cetera. The role of the NCAA as a form of regulatory agency is extremely vital if the kind of programs desired by the public are to be provided honestly, equitably and sensibly.