

Academics Versus Athletics: The American College Faculty Assesses Sports at the Turn of the Century

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During the decades preceding the turn of the century few members of the campus community and few of the constituents served by higher education voiced any criticism of college sports. At large schools and small around the nation, games and races and the festivities accompanying them grew in popularity among students, alumni, and townspeople. But the transformation of intercollegiate athletics from a casual, student-organized activity into an increasingly time-consuming and costly institutional enterprise elicited a mixed response from the faculties of many American colleges and universities. Most professors did not criticize the development of college sports; quite a few had participated informally when they were undergraduates. And if some college teachers echoed the sentiments of the conservative clerics and curmudgeons who called sports “frivolous,” many more agreed with the writers who extolled the health-giving and character-building attributes of athletics. Moreover, the majority of college professors identified with their schools, first and foremost. Sports helped forge school spirit, enhanced institutional prestige, and as a consequence, seemed to increase enrollment. Besides, the football game on Saturday was often the best show in town.

But increasing numbers of the professoriat viewed themselves as scholars and teachers above all else. They identified with a larger intellectual community and defined their own function and the educational mission of their schools in different terms than most of their predecessors and many of their colleagues. Reflecting the “professionalization” of academic culture – an earned doctorate, original research, and publication – these men were among the first to criticize the “over-emphasis” of athletics for its detrimental effects on the “higher learning.” Ironically, however, their orientation toward their professional duties rather than their schools’ activities rendered many of them reluctant to undertake the “housekeeping chores” necessary to keep athletics from getting out of control.

Lacking detailed information about the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of either the advocates or the critics of college sports, one can nevertheless refer to Robert K. Merton’s suggestive typology and contrast his “locals” and “cosmopolitans” among college professors according to their orientation toward intercollegiate athletics. Using the statements of concerned faculty members, drawn from the histories of more than sixty institutions and research in ten university archives, this paper will endeavor to trace some key issues in the debate over athletic governance and to chronicle an important aspect of the ongoing controversy between academic principles and athletic practices.