

Intercollegiate Athletic Reform: An Historical View of Presidents, Governing Boards, and Faculty

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For at least a century, college athletics have been so vital to American institutions of higher learning that the institutions individually or collectively cannot, or at least will not, reform them to the point that they are principally in the educational mode. Intercollegiate athletics have developed as the most important commercially driven auxiliary enterprise on most campuses. Faculties, meanwhile, have been effectively removed from the intercollegiate athletic arena. Presidents are generally considered to be the key to the educational reform of college athletics, but history shows that presidents will not be key players in reform. There is one group, the governing board, that for 100 years has been involved in athletics, setting policy at individual institutions. This paper shows that because governing boards have historically set the policy of individual institutions, it would be logical for governing boards to be represented in conferences and the national governing agencies in athletics. Governing boards should be made responsible at the regional and national level for policy they already set institutionally.

From the time of Harvard's President Charles W. Eliot it was clear to some that presidents could not reform athletics. Eliot, the best known university president in American history, said during the most controversial year in college athletics, 1905, that college presidents "certainly cannot reform football...." College presidents by then, according to Thorstein Veblen, had already passed "from the ranks of learning to those of business enterprise." As recently as 1995, an officer of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute has said that "today's presidents are fund raisers, and they shy away from controversy." My own study of about 50 college archives looking at presidential papers confirms this. Presidents are generally cheerleaders for athletics, but give very little leadership in athletic reform. They are involved in raising money, using athletics

for publicity and money, and are not immersed in the educational process. This has been the mode for over a century.

Presidents who desire to reform athletics are often caught between at least two power groups that have traditionally been important in the athletic equation, the faculty on the one hand and the governing board on the other. Faculties appear to be concerned principally about academics and thus about the academic integrity of their institutions. governing boards are usually concerned about the financial stability and growth of their institutions. The two groups have often differed on the value of athletics. The president is caught between these two groups but is beholden only to one -- the governing board. It has been a rare president who has taken a stance on athletics which differs from the board, at least not for long.

The paper shows examples of governing board incursions into Big-Time athletics since the 1880s generally taking the side of a highly commercial-professional model rather than an educational model. The examples chosen are from Harvard and Dartmouth in the nineteenth century, Southern Methodist in the 1920s and William and Mary in the 1940s and 50s. There are many other fine examples. The paper concludes with the present situation in which presidents have refused to attempt to reform athletics in an educational model (note the 1990s presidentially dominated Report of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics of 1991). Furthermore, the faculty has been eliminated from the athletic equation, as nearly all institutional faculty representatives are presidentially appointed for fear that faculty would impose an educational model. As the commercial-professional model has become ingrained in higher education, it is logical to make the policy makers responsible above the institutional level for athletic policy, the governing boards.



“The Berkeley Bunch”