



Academics Versus Athletics? The Protection and Prioritization of College Athletics in an Era of Neoliberal Austerity

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Abstract

In an era of neoliberal capitalism, public funding to higher education has increasingly been subject to austerity measures that, based on cost–benefit analyses, have resulted in privatization, tuition hikes, outsourcing, and program, staff, and pay cuts. Official rationales for such measures center on cost effectiveness as well as institutional health and efficiency, yet the elephant in the room remains: that of continued financial and institutional support of college athletics. Originally devised to be supplemental to academic programs, university sports have expanded into revenue generating systems of mass entertainment becoming institutional vehicles for the potential acquisition of status and money. Yet, the majority of US colleges report that their athletic programs operate at a financial loss. Here, drawing on Thompson’s (2005: 23) conceptualization of neoliberalism as an “ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic,” the protection of college athletics over academics will be further unpacked, paying specific attention to institutional priorities where the continuation of athletic spending on ‘big sports’ is considered sacrosanct.

Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, the fiscal challenges facing higher education in the US were forced into the public domain by the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. A mass transition to virtual modes of instruction has forced colleges and universities to contend with declines in enrollments, losses in revenue from on-campus services such as housing and fees, and barriers to international students (Rosenberg 2020). In addition, universities and colleges continued to contend with a multitude of existing problems that have been further exacerbated by the situation (i.e., ballooning student loan debt, administrative bloat, reductions in endowments, declining state and federal revenues, tuition increases, an increased availability and access to trade and alternative careers, waning public support and a dwindling college age population nationwide) (Drozdowski 2020). As many have noted (Pells 2020; Rosenberg 2020), the coronavirus has exposed the already burgeoning crisis of higher education in the US. And, although these problems represent the consequences of fifty-plus years of neoliberal policy initiatives, COVID-19 has once again laid bare the consequences

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of neoliberalism, namely problems that can be directly attributable to a rise in corporatization, privatization, cost effectiveness analysis, and the prioritization of status and money. More broadly stated, neoliberal capitalism and its accompanying policies have created a pattern of financial mismanagement that spans a period of several decades.

Despite the ongoing crisis to higher education, what has become even more apparent is the enduring commitment of universities to intercollegiate sports. The pandemic forced institutions to more directly reveal their priorities, and ‘big sports’ athletics (football and basketball), often touted as being fiscally supportive to other institutional endeavors, were exposed as having overwhelmed them. Therefore, resulting cuts were targeted elsewhere, including at nonrevenue-generating sports. For example, consider that the University of Cincinnati cut its men’s soccer program in April 2020 saving \$ 726,498 (Rosenberg 2020), a program that performs well but makes little revenue for the university. Yet, in August the football coach received a salary increase pushing him from \$2.3 million to \$ 3.4 million per annum. This was despite the reality that the football team would not be accepted into any of the Power Five conferences (Forde 2020).

While some may attribute these cuts to the crises of the pandemic, here I acknowledge that the pandemic has merely exposed an enduring prioritization of athletics, specifically those associated with or having the potential to generate revenue, over both nonrevenue generating athletics and academics by the neo-liberal university. Drawing on Thompson’s (2005: 23) conceptualization of neoliberalism as an “ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic,” I will utilize case examples to explore the protection of ‘big sports’ college athletics over other varsity athletics¹ and academics, paying specific attention to institutional priorities where the continuation of athletic spending endures despite relatively little benefit to the university itself. In addition, I draw attention to the impact that this has on the wider university culture focusing on institutional and NCAA responses to rape and sexual assault perpetrated by athletes and coaches. To lay the foundation for this, I first provide a brief overview of the existing literature on college sports, before providing a definition of neoliberalism as it will be employed here.

College Sports: A Brief Introduction to the Literature

There is considerable literature on college sports (Beamon 2008; Bowen and Levin 2003; Byers and Hammer 1995; Clotfleter 2011; Fort and Quirk 1999) with much of the scholarship highlighting the complexity of the policy and practices associated with college sports and the impact they have on the athletes (Comeaux 2017; King-White 2018). From the coining of the term student-athlete in the 1950s (Sperber 1999), there has been scholarly and media attention paid to the commercialization of young people’s athletic capabilities at the expense of their academic performance (Edwards 1985; Van Rheneen 2015). Of central concern are the racial dynamics of collegiate sports whereby a large percentage of the athletes are black or African American (Harper 2018; Hawkins 2010). For example, in the 2014–2015 academic year 55 percent of NCAA Division I footballers were black men, as were 56 percent of Division I basketball players (Harper 2018).

¹ The term “varsity sports/athletics” in the US and Canada refers to the primary or principal athletics teams at a university, college, or high school. Although this is an inclusive definition and can extend to club/recreational teams, it is used here to refer to NCAA Division I, II and III teams, Olympic athletes, as well as other teams that compete on behalf of the university.

Furthermore, there is a correlation between the revenue generated between these sports and the percentage of black collegiate athletes. For example, the University of Kentucky's basketball and football teams generated \$28 million and \$36 million, respectively, in the academic year 2016–2017. The basketball team composition was 57 percent black, and the football team was 59 percent black, compared to only 6.8 percent of the student population (Gayles et al. 2018; US Department of Education 2016). These racial dynamics have come under scrutiny due to the commodification of young black men for the highly commercial yet nonprofit NCAA and its affiliates, a practice that has been deemed exploitative (Branch 2011; Hawkins 2010).

The concern in the literature revolves around the fact that there is a large amount of revenue generated for institutions, athletic departments, and the NCAA (Nocera and Strauss 2016), but athletes are not paid for their labor. Instead, they are classified as amateur athletes choosing to play their sport for the 'love of the game' (Gayles et al. 2018) opposed to profiting from their sport (Gruneau 2006; Llewellyn and Gleaves 2016). The central justification for this arrangement, both in the US and elsewhere, is the moral underpinnings and propagated discourse that surround the ideals of amateurism.

An in-depth discussion of the concept of amateurism is outside the scope and purpose of this article (see Llewellyn and Gleaves 2016 for more). However, it must be noted that the current understanding of amateurism—i.e., the moral concepts of fair play, good sportsmanship, sport in its purist form, equality—does not have its roots in ancient Greece and the Olympics as is often thought, rather it originated in nineteenth century western life. Amateurism was connected to,

the class-conscious, and often racist, desire to exclude from sport people who might be defined as social inferiors; and the belief that sport could be an important arena in which to school young men and, later, young women, in a set of rational and positive cultural values (Gruneau 2006: 565).

Therefore, amateurism is not, nor has it ever been, an abstract moral principle, rather it is connected to power-relations and its socio-cultural and historical classist underpinnings. It has always served those in power yet through the ideological discourse of equality, meritocracy, character building, and masculine virility, the concept hides the true exploitative nature of its practice. Furthermore, amateurism has always been connected to commercialization, and although it was casual at first, organized sports at the national and international levels cannot be distinguished from the corrupting influence of profit, bureaucracy, and industry (Gruneau 2006).

Given this history of amateurism, one that has heavily influenced the development of the NCAA, it is not surprising that in university sports in the US there exists a racialized and classist power structure. And, although the NCAA operates on the assumption that they are providing the student-athlete an education through the offering of scholarships, tuition waivers, housing, and in some programs even stipends, this allows the wealthiest teams and conferences to secure the most sought-after athletes, as well as helping to justify any exploitation as being an opportunity to develop student's athleticism (Senne 2016). The current system, therefore, privileges the NCAA and the power brokers that benefit, such as athletic directors, coaches, sponsors, and conference commissioners, who, unlike the athletes, are disproportionately white (Branch 2011). The irony here is this lack of pay exists under the mantra of amateurism, a justification that is invoked under the guise of protecting the college student athletes from exploitation and ensuring they enjoy the educational experience of attending university.

In addition, there is significant scholarly and media attention paid to surrounding institutional protections afforded college athletes that engage in misconduct (Cintron et al. 2020). This includes research that highlights the prevalence of sexual assaults committed by student athletes (Boeringer 1999; Caron et al. 1997; Crosset 1999, 2016), as well as the protections, or lack thereof, offered to the victims by the institutions (Lave 2016; Levine et al. 2019; Martin 2015; McCray 2015). Beyond the issue of sexual assault, other literature focuses on broader violations of conduct including academic wrongdoing and illegal behaviors (Nixon 2014; Pells 2017). These behaviors include, but are not limited to, improper recruitment practices, the misrepresentation of academic credentials, plagiarism (i.e., student athletes submitting work completed by others), and the provision of illicit gifts to athletes by boosters that are often courted by the university to provide student athletes' financial support. The historical prevalence of these behaviors has minimized not only their seriousness but normalized them as deviant byproducts of college athletics—the cost of doing business. There has been a recent increase in misconduct behaviors, so much so that the NCAA proposed and passed new rules and regulations in 2012 to help ensure compliance (Nixon 2014), and universities, especially those with large public scandals, increased resource allocations to their compliance departments/staff. However, it must be noted that despite changes in regulations, scandals continue to persist with little repercussion from the NCAA. For example, in 2017 a federal investigation revealed that a number of basketball coaches for prestigious programs had accepted bribes from sportswear companies, athlete's managers and advisors, for students agreeing to commit to various schools, as well as for access to the players and their families. At the time, reporting on the investigation suggested this “would shake college basketball to its core” (Staples 2019). However, although some of the implicated actors took plea-agreements in court, the NCAA did very little to address the rule violations made by three head coaches or the schools associated with the Power Five conferences (Will Wade of Louisiana State University, Sean Miller of the University of Arizona, and Bill Self of the University of Kansas). More simply, the NCAA failed to enforce their own rules and regulations (Staples 2019).

More in line with the focus here is research that has focused on the institutional relationship between sports and other university priorities, such as applications and admissions, facility upgrades and increased public support (Robinett 2014; Uthman 2013). Predicated on what has been termed the “Flutie effect/factor²”—the belief that good athletic performance increases admission applications—many universities subscribe and promote the notion that intercollegiate sports are instrumental to the improvement of the institutions' academic missions. This is despite subsequent research that the Flutie effect is not as reliable as suggested, as subsequent research has indicated that it is little more than happenstance, and at best increased enrollments are not sustained (King-White 2018). Despite this, the Flutie factor has been fully embraced by college administrators, governing boards, and the general public often with little to no consideration of the very important fact that in pursuit of bigger and better athletic successes, universities are competing for finite resources. Despite this, in an era of neoliberalism, the ideological commitment to athletic programs (including ideals of potential program/

² The Flutie effect/factor is named after Doug Flutie, the star quarterback for the Boston College Eagles, who completed a touchdown pass in the last few seconds of a 1984 game against the Miami-Florida Hurricanes, leading them to a 47–45 victory. In the two years following, applications to Boston College increased by 30 percent, with many attributing this increase directly to Flutie's last second “Hail Mary” pass and the resulting success of the football program (Silverthorne 2013).

team successes and the revenue it *could* bring to the university) comes at a cost. This is especially so, considering most college athletes do not continue on to a professional sports career, providing no revenue for their university (Van Rheen 2015).

A Brief Note on Neoliberalism

My focus is not to rehash a definitional debate as to the correct usage of the term, rather it is to set out how neoliberalism is utilized here as a frame to understand the current climate of university athletics in an increasingly heightened era of austerity in higher education in the US. However, it must be recognized that there is considerable debate and discussion on the definition of neoliberalism (Harvey 2016; Kenton 2018; McClanahan 2019; Thompson 2005), and the term is often used as an ambiguous catch-all in everyday language. While some argue that neoliberalism refers to a policy model that addresses economic control being transferred from the public to private sectors of society (Kenton 2018), others suggest it is a political project that was initiated by the capitalist class in response to perceptions of threat in the 1970s; both an ideological and economic shift that resulted because of a slow breakdown of embedded liberalism (Harvey 2005). While I agree that neoliberalism was initiated gradually as both an economic and political logic, I do not believe responsibility for this shift can be attributed solely to the capitalist class. Rather, I agree with Thompson's (2005: 23) conceptualization of neoliberalism as an "ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic", what Kotsko (2018) would term a "theology" whereby it infiltrates all aspects of human life and informs how we view the world.

Furthermore, through this conceptualization it is argued that neoliberalism legitimates itself, whereby individualism and freedom (more oft economic freedom, meaning the acquisition of material wealth), are heralded as "the highest actualization of human liberty" (Kotsko 2018: 10). Therefore, individualism and economic freedom/success are core components of neoliberal thinking, meaning that to truly embrace neoliberal individualism is for each person (or in this case each institution) to recognize their own responsibility for success. This calls for the rejection of state assistance/responsibility for its citizens' welfare (i.e., moving away from public programs and state ensured safety-nets) and for the making of good fiscal decisions based on individuals' freedom of choice—i.e., to borrow, trade, purchase, consume in a free market, one that is increasingly privatized and controlled by corporate elites.

Essential to neoliberal thinking is the process of responsabilization (Masquelier 2017) where the individual (and institution) internalizes the responsibility for their choices both consciously and subconsciously. This reshapes understandings of social conditions which necessitate that people are self-reliant. They move away from the social and engage with the market, one that "requires financial expenditure ensuring capital accumulation and profit making" (Collins and Rothe 2020: 26). As argued by Giroux (2015: 3),

neoliberalism's contempt for the social is now matched by an utter disdain for the common good. Public spheres that once encouraged progressive ideas, enlightened social policies, democratic values, critical dialogue and exchange have been replaced by corporate entities whose ultimate fidelity is to increasing profit margins and producing a vast commercial culture.

The pervasive nature of neoliberalism (that it permeates every aspect of life and serves to reify and legitimate itself through a cultural logic that requires market engagement) means that not only is it normalized but so are the harms that result. The larger population, even if they recognize these harms (Collins and Rothe 2020) give their consent for its larger imposition as it becomes embedded as cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971). After all, the attractiveness of neoliberalism is that it ignores structural or systemic accountability for harm and instead pushes blame for all social ills onto the individual.

Public universities in the US have not escaped neoliberalism as a form of governance, rather we now have an educational environment that mirrors corporate enterprise. The administrative structure is focused on efficiency, managerialism, accountability, and strategic planning (Shore 2008), where students are now customers, faculty are pitted against each other in competition for external grant funding, with a management structure that mimics business models of private enterprise (Giroux 2011). This now firmly established *modus operandi*, as others have argued, has relegated education as a secondary goal for universities (Bok 2003). Instead, the focus has become the college ‘experience’, an emphasis that has been prioritized (Tuchman 2005; Washburn 2005). As a result, college sports have become integral to that ‘experience’ despite the majority of colleges reporting that their athletic programs operate at a financial loss. Here, case examples from Stanford University, Pennsylvania State University and the University of Maryland will be examined as they relate to the dominance of intercollegiate sports as part of the ‘college experience’. These cases were selected as they not only expose the ongoing impact of neoliberalism on higher education made more obvious by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also highlight the realities of the increased corporatization and commercialization of college sports, as well as the detrimental and sometimes disastrous impact they have on the very institutions that promote them. To be clear, I am not arguing that the pandemic has caused this prioritization of intercollegiate athletics, rather that it has been long prioritized through the initiation of neoliberal policies and cultural logics, and the pandemic has merely laid bare this prioritization in a more obvious and direct fashion.

Intercollegiate Athletics: A Regressive Business Model

‘Big Sports’ and Their Impact

As coronavirus cases soared to the hundreds of thousands across the US in 2020, public and private universities alike made the difficult decision to switch to online learning. Many reporters noted that the fiscal insecurity of the pandemic brought to the fore the current state of college athletics, namely that they are “large businesses covered in nonprofit wrapping paper” (Rosenberg 2020). Promoted as a celebration of amateur athletics, the reality is the industry of college sports is estimated to generate \$14 billion annually from sponsorship deals, ticket sales, as well as television and broadcasting contracts. This revenue is then used to support sports programs that are not revenue generating as well as to ensure Title IX compliance (women’s access to sports programming). However, when the pandemic hit the decision was made to call off several conference tournaments, including the billion-dollar generating March Madness tournament. In efforts to save college football from a similar fate, teams were subjected to a slew of safety measures (i.e., quarantining, frequent testing), only for numerous games to be cancelled, or played in front of largely empty stadiums, despite dangers to the players (Pells 2020).

Cuts at Stanford University

The ramifications of these cancellations included the axing of large numbers of nonrevenue generating sports programs including Olympic sports.³ For example, students and alumni at Stanford University came together in opposition of an administrative proposal to cut eleven sports from their athletic program by the end of the 2020–2021 academic year. These sports included men's and women's field hockey, fencing, lightweight rowing, men's volleyball, co-ed and women's sailing, synchronized swimming, squash, men's volleyball and wrestling. These cuts impacted 240 student athletes, 22 coaches, as well as 20 staff members. Despite the success of many of these programs (i.e., they have won 27 Olympic medals and 20 national championships), the Board of Trustees went ahead with the cuts justifying their decision based on fiscally driven rationales that highlight the importance of commercialization as being a core factor for program success.

Sponsorship featured heavily in Stanford's decision. Six of the cut programs did not receive sponsorship from the NCAA, and all the programs were receiving a very small amount of support from the 350 Division I institutions. Stanford reported that when comparing themselves with other institutions at the Power Five level, the other institutions have far superior budgets that support fewer sports. Unlike the Power Five Conferences, the eleven programs selected for discontinuation are not commercial and Stanford noted the lack of national and local fan support as another reason considered in their decision-making. Underlying these other rationales is the athletic department deficit of \$25 million. By cutting these programs, the financial savings are projected to be \$8 million annually (Stanford News 2020). Therefore, success is not defined in terms of competition performance, but the revenue, notability, and commercial notoriety the sport brings to the institution.

The example of Stanford University is not unique as similar program cuts can be observed across the country. The University of Cincinnati eliminated its men's soccer program (West 2020), Harvard, John Hopkins, Princeton, and Brown Universities cancelled their men's water polo seasons, Dartmouth college terminated their men's and women's diving and swimming programs (Hu 2020), William and Mary announced they were cutting seven varsity sport programs (Johnson 2020), the University of Iowa eliminated four programs at the end of the 2020–2021 academic year (men's and women's swimming and diving, men's tennis, and men's gymnastics) (Hu 2020), and the University of Minnesota cut three men's sports programs (Greder 2020). These are just a few examples that received media coverage, with 352 NCAA sports programs reportedly having been terminated since March 2020 (HoopDirt.com 2020). The justifications for these cuts are overwhelmingly touted as being the budget crisis brought about by COVID-19, yet the reality is that college sports have been stripped down to what it really is: lucrative television programming and large sponsorship deals for football and basketball.

Criminal Complicity?: Rape and Sexual Assault

The prioritization of revenue-generating athletics to higher education in the US becomes apparent when examining the hidden and related issue of rape and sexual assault, especially when the emphasis on athletic success and branding lead universities, and some individuals

³ Many Olympic teams such as gymnastics or wrestling are heavily comprised of athletes that come from college teams, ones that do not generate revenue for the University.

that work for them, to make decisions to protect the university at all costs despite all potential harms. Consider, for example, that a cursory Google search brings up many examples, including the Jameis Winston rape case at Florida State University (McLaughlin 2016), the two accusations of sexual assault against LaDarius Jackson at the University of South Florida (Jacoby 2019), as well as the rape case against Jordan Goldenberg Jr of the University of Kansas (Scoby 2016). In addition, there are some notable cases that received heightened media coverage, such as the sexual assault scandal at Baylor University where allegations have been made that as many as 52 acts of rape were committed by 31 football players. While these numbers exceed the 17 acts by 19 players acknowledged as having been reported by the University, what makes this case illustrative of the pervasiveness of the problem is the lack of investigation by Baylor when the women initially came forward. Furthermore, allegations were made that athletics staff actively promoted a culture of sexual violence and instructed women to lie about their claims when they came forward about their victimization (Mervosh 2017).

The NCAA has very strict punishments for students that are involved in inappropriate and criminal behaviors while playing college sports. This includes drug use, getting bad grades, or taking unsanctioned gifts and monies from donors; however, until recently (May 1, 2020) there was no rule in place that prevented a college athlete accused of sexual assault or rape from transferring to another school to continue their sports career. Termed the ‘Predator Pipeline’, schools both unknowingly and knowingly were engaged in the practice of recruiting and admitting athletes with histories of violence against women. In an investigation by *USA Today*, they found that since 2014 at least 28 athletes were able to transfer to NCAA schools despite having received school-based disciplinary action for sexual assault. A further five were able to do so having been charged and convicted through the criminal justice system (Jacoby 2019).

The newly initiated NCAA rule came into effect during the 2021–2022 academic year and requires college athletes to annually disclose any acts of violence that led to an investigation. This includes Title IX violations as well as criminal arrests and investigations. Specifically, this includes instances of domestic and dating violence, sexual offenses, murder, manslaughter, assaults that involved deadly weapons and/or caused serious bodily injury. It also requires that universities and colleges adopt written policies reflecting this rule. While many are praising the NCAA for adopting such a rule, it does very little for those who have already been victimized. In fact, the policy only came to pass following litigation against the NCAA where seven victims from three different schools accused them of failing to adequately protect women from sexual assault by college athletes. Furthermore, the rule is somewhat limited as it contains little to no provisions for universities that are found not to be compliant. As noted by Daisy Tackett, a former University of Kansas student and victim of an athlete-perpetrated rape,

If the NCAA wants to take sexual violence seriously, they would guarantee that any athlete who sexually violates others will not be allowed back into the clearing house, instead of just leaving it up to the school’s discretion...The NCAA should take on the liability if it means protecting students, instead of protecting themselves (Tackett as cited in Jacoby 2020).

The NCAA have effectively pushed the responsibility back to the universities instead of directly instituting a policy themselves, leading many to argue the rule is symbolic at best.

Beyond athletes, there are many instances of coaches being afforded similar protections, the most notable example being Gerald “Jerry” Sandusky, who was criminally prosecuted for the rape and abuse of ten boys over a 15-year timeframe. Utilizing his charitable

football camp and his position at Pennsylvania State University, Sandusky was able to gain access to his victims, utilizing the football facilities to commit his crimes (Chappell 2012). Despite university authorities being notified of his behavior on more than one occasion, the university allowed his abuses to continue for 14 years before Sandusky was arrested by state police. In this case, the university clearly put the importance of the football program before the welfare and justice of the child victims. The commitment to the football program was so enduring that students rioted at the news of then football coach, Joe Paterno's tenure coming to an end as a result of the scandal. Ironically, the students were effectively defending the university's complicity in covering-up child sexual assault. As argued by Rockstroh (2011: 16).

Penn. State students rioted because life in the corporate state is so devoid of meaning...that identification with a sports team gives an empty existence said meaning... Anything but face the emptiness and acknowledge one's complicity therein and then direct one's fury at the creators of the stultified conditions of this culture.

Neoliberalism dominates cultural logics, so much so that the university was prepared to go to such lengths to maintain a culture of complicity and silence. While cursory in my analysis, universities' reluctance to hold those accountable for the most egregious of crimes once again illustrates the dominance and commercialization of sports, displacing the academic mission of higher education and sacrificing the wellbeing of others (i.e., the victims of these crimes) to ensure their competitiveness and the success of revenue generating sports.

The Impact on Other Academics and Other University Business

Beyond cuts to non-revenue generating athletics and complicity in cases of rape and sexual assault, the regressive business model of college sports can be felt across university campuses. The global pandemic has merely exposed and exacerbated the corporatization and neoliberal policies and practices that have dominated collegiate sports for the last 45 years. Students at Division I schools (and many other schools as well), independent of their interest, are required to pay fees to support their athletic programs (Ridpath 2012). This problem is especially acute for aspirant schools, those that are sister colleges to flagships, where there is an unrelenting need to increase visibility in anticipation of a potential change in conference. This is done despite a broader lack of interest in athletics on campuses and within the local community, something that is reflected in the lack of financial support and indifference of fans. These schools require fees from their student body that can amount to as much as \$2,000 per year, funds that are often tapped for the purpose of constructing large stadia ranging in costs from \$60 to \$100 million, despite the unpopularity of the sports programming at that campus (King-White 2018). Other subsidization comes in the form of unpaid student labor (internships). Furthermore, in a 2013 study Demirel found that Division III schools often use athletics (especially men's athletics) as a recruitment tool but without the offering of scholarships. The secondary vehicle for financial support for sports comes through corporate and individual benefactors.

Contributing to this neoliberal business culture of intercollegiate sports is the large number of private and corporate interests that heavily influence or even surpass the larger educational mission of the university. One such case that garnered considerable attention was the college admissions scandal which highlights the role of coaches and athletic departments as gatekeepers to student admissions. The scandal exposed payments made by wealthy parents, some of whom were celebrities, for the use of fake athletic credentials to

secure their children's admission to prestigious universities. The scheme involved coaches from a variety of programs and institutions, many of whom were charged criminally. However, beyond athletic fraud, the scandal exposed the considerable power that athletics departments have over recruiting legitimate athletes to exclusive schools independent of academic standards. Having the financial resources to support a prospective student's athletic endeavors, participating in niche sports such as rowing or fencing, or applying to early decision programs that require immediate enrollment upon admittance (application dates are later for the students not on scholarship or dependent on financial aid offers), furthers discrimination against the less affluent (Anderson and Svrluga 2019). For example, consider that Harvard generally admits less than five percent of their applicants, yet 88 percent of those who are designated a student athlete are admitted (Anderson 2018). While universities insist that admissions departments are the ones in charge not coaches, it is clear these decisions are heavily influenced by athletics.

Unlike the college admissions scandal, other university practices do not amount to criminal wrongdoing, rather they represent more normalized modes of 'doing business.' For example, consider the \$102 million donation to Pennsylvania State University by Terrance and Kim Pegula for the building of an ice hockey stadium. Promoted as benevolent benefactors who have done a lot for Pennsylvania State University sports, lesser attention has been paid to the origin of their wealth and the environmental harms that have been perpetrated to accumulate it (see Giroux et al. 2018 for an excellent detailed analysis). The Pegulas owned a gas and oil company, East Resources, that drilled on the Marcellus Shale using the highly damaging technique of hydrofracking (Ahmadi and John 2015; Bamberger and Oswald 2015; Eaton 2013; Hernandez 2018; Hirsch et al. 2018). Beyond the environmental harm caused by fracking, East Resources was repeatedly cited for violating regulations (Gilbert and Gold 2013) and were also responsible for several toxic spills (Giroux et al. 2018). Although there was reporting covering the Pegulas' business ventures at the time of their initial donation, media coverage prioritized their success and generosity.

Furthermore, after making their initial donation, Terrance Pegula was vocal about his expectations from Pennsylvania State University. Specifically, when he was interviewed by a student reporter he said, "I would tell students that this contribution could be just the tip of the iceberg, the first of many such gifts, if the development of the Marcellus Shale is allowed to proceed" (Davis 2010: 9). Despite the well-documented environmental harms of hydrofracking Pennsylvania State University both instituted a research team and a center (the Marcellus Center for Outreach and Research) whose purpose is to advocate for the proliferation of fracking. They also discouraged (prevented) faculty research publications that highlighted the dangers and harms caused by fracking (Giroux et al. 2018). This is counter to fundamental principles of academe, namely that of academic freedom and shared governance. This, however, is not unique to Pennsylvania State University.

Consider as another example the University of Maryland's move to the Big Ten conference⁴ in 2012, a realignment that was justified because of increased athletic spending and budget deficits in the years leading up to the decision (DeLuca and Batts Maddox 2018).

The University of Maryland's decision brought with it large facilities projects such as the construction/renovation of a \$155 million football facility that also provides academic programming on entrepreneurship. In justifying the decision, university President Wallace Loh said the project is a "reminder of the world-class athletics, groundbreaking research

⁴ The Big Ten conference is the oldest intercollegiate Division I conference.

and innovative academics” (Maryland Athletics 2014) at the University of Maryland. This is not out of character for Loh, as he has been very vocal in his promotion of college sports as being instrumental to academics, saying it is “a new financial paradigm for intercollegiate athletics whereby the program supports the university and not vice versa” (Grasgreen 2012: 11). Maryland also moved ahead with a ten-year contract with sports apparel company Under Armor to provide the university money and sports ware (Tracy 2015), as well as using it as a testing ground for new products. However, this has given Kevin Plank, the CEO of Under Armor, considerable influence. Plank contributed financially to the aforementioned construction project, he set up an entrepreneurial scholarship program called the Cupid’s Cup, he sits on Maryland’s Board of Trustees, he was an active influence in the hiring of the 2010 academic director, and he is an advocate for the conference realignment. These may seem like unexpected roles for a sports apparel company’s CEO, yet this is not a unique relationship as a similar situation happened at the University of Oregon with Nike.

Phil Knight, the founder of Nike, at a time when the university was seeking outside funding, offered financial support for varying projects that held his interest. The University of Oregon accepted the offered support despite some of Nike’s questionable business practices such as labor exploitation, in addition to physical and verbal abuse and gender discrimination (Hunt 2018; Teather 2005). Knight and Nike have provided funding for a number of buildings, stadia, the library, and most recently a new track and field stadium (Bachman 2021). As argued by Hunt (2018), the dependency on monies from Nike led to a distortion of the university’s priorities. Nike’s intertwinement with the University of Oregon and Under Armor’s involvement with the University of Maryland demonstrate that the domain of the public university is increasingly influenced, and in some cases has succumbed to corporate and private interests.

Undermining transparency and accountability to faculty in favor of financial reward has increasingly become a common practice at universities. The culture has changed whereby managerial models of neoliberal leadership increasingly make decisions that reflect the reduction in investment in the public good—i.e., the displacement of the academic mission—in favor of more reductive forms of management that prioritize the market, capital accumulation, and streamlining resources in the name of efficiency. The logical irony of the current business model is that universities have long justified their existence by emphasizing the public good of higher education. However, when university administrators align themselves with corporate interests because of commercial sports revenue, the results can be far-reaching.

The corporatization and commercialization of college sports has an extensive impact not only on the culture of the university, but on the faculty, students, and staff. While I have selected a few examples to present in detail above, I would be remiss not to emphasize that although these cases by their very nature may be extreme to warrant their inclusion, similar decisions occur across higher education in the US. Therefore, the average student not only is subjected to increased student fees to support athletic programs and stadia construction, but they are also emerged in a neoliberal cultural logic that influences their wider college experience. Students are subjected to a university culture that favors entertainment over education, where athletes are iconized, coach and team idolization is preferred to independent thinking and critical thought, and competition is favored over collaboration (Giroux et al. 2018). This neoliberal cultural logic rebrands students as customers, blurs the distinction between education and training, and promotes corporate values. Commodification and consumption therefore become the primary vehicle for student engagement. In looking for the college ‘experience,’ students are surrounded by commercial consumer culture, with campuses increasingly resembling shopping malls and recreation centers, with

more and more amenities available for consumption. Everything is marketed and branded as being central to the ‘college experience’ at whatever institution the student chooses to attend. Students are not impervious to the college brand, of which athletics dominates, and are reduced to product consumers whereby education has become an increasingly small component of the neoliberal university (Rosenberg 2020).

Conclusion

As argued by Rosenberg (2020), “Revenue sports don’t prop the whole thing up—they *are* the whole thing.” This statement sums up the regressive business model that has dominated college sports for the last 45 years. The recent crisis of the COVID-19 global pandemic has more directly exposed what many have previously noted, which is that college sports—particularly football and basketball—are so prioritized that they have been deemed instrumental to the success of the neoliberal university. Yet, as indicated by the case examples above, it is not a sustainable model for most universities and colleges as they become increasingly dependent on private and corporate donors/collaborations that infringe on the broader academic mission of the institution.

Furthermore, within athletics departments programming cuts are made, not based on the competitive success of the athletes, but on neoliberal practices that reduce varsity sports to financial standing. Cuts are often made in efforts to funnel saved revenue back into football and basketball (big-name coaches, new or upgraded facilities) with the hopes of conference realignment, broadcasting deals, and increased merchandising and ticketing sales. Yet, for many universities gambling on the hope of success does not work in their favor leaving many athletic departments struggling to balance deficits. Despite this reality, the Flutie factor remains dominant in the justification narrative promoted by university administrators, where institutional branding due to the increased commercialization of college sports will benefit academic programming—i.e., student enrollment.

Additionally, in the dogged pursuit of sporting success little concern is given to the damage and harms that result. From the embedded nature of a corporate culture on university campuses, to the relentless idolization of sports players and coaches, to increasing student fees, to the covering-up of crimes such as rape and sexual assault, neoliberal leadership increasingly prioritizes corporate donors and capital accumulation over investment in the public good. As stated before, this leads to a logical irony—that despite this adherence to neoliberal corporate ideology, universities have long justified their existence by emphasizing the public good of higher education.

To be clear, the answer here is not to abandon university sports, nor is it to minimize their importance to college athletes, campus communities, their fans, and the larger society. Rather, the problems center around the dominance of neoliberalism as a managerial model, one that now pervades all aspects of university life. In an environment where egalitarianism is supposedly supported, intercollegiate sports emerge as a hypocritical enterprise where utilizing football and basketball to support other university programming is not only fiscally flawed for most universities but is also legally and morally suspect. To continue down this path is to see college football continue to grow reflecting market demands, and academics, other varsity sports, college campus environments, amateurism, and traditions will have to adapt and fit around it—a reality many in higher education are not ready to accept.

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