

Reaction to Michael Oriard's "NCAA Academic Reform: History, Context and Challenges"

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a response to Michael Oriard's keynote address. Similar to Oriard's analysis, the author adopts a historical approach to examine academic reform and its drivers within the intercollegiate athletics context. The author suggests that faculties, students, and boards of trustees should play key roles in academic reforms, and also proposes several reform options.

As anyone who has ever read one of Michael Oriard's several books or has listened to his presentations on college sport, you know that his work is thorough and scholarly. He is like a dedicated athlete who trains well, competes vigorously, and gets up when he is hit to compete once again. He is the consummate scholar athlete. But he is also a faculty member at a big-time institution, so you know from past experience that, relative to faculty, few of those in power will listen and act on his analysis of intercollegiate athletics.

To some extent, we share each other's shoes historically, as we both played intercollegiate athletics, Michael in football with Notre Dame and I in basketball and baseball at Northwestern, less than 100 miles from South Bend. We were both interested in the liberal arts, he in literature and I in history. We both played a little professional sport, Mike with the Kansas City Chiefs and in the Canadian Football League and I in the Chicago White Sox system. We have both written extensively on college sport, using facts, not generally opinions, pointing out both the good as well as problematic areas while being academics at Oregon State and Penn State respectively. A major difference: I don't have back problems from being hit a few too many times in football.

Michael's summary of intercollegiate sports with an emphasis on football is right on point (Oriard, 2012). For one thing, there was never a shining period, a golden era, of college sport when amateurism was upheld and when professionalism and commercialism were not in existence. Commercialism began with the first American intercollegiate contest, a crew meet between Harvard and Yale, when a railroad entrepreneur paid all expenses for the two crews on a vacation lake in the middle of New Hampshire, far away from the two campuses. Professional-

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ism began when Yale hired the first professional coach during the American Civil War so that Yale might first defeat Harvard in a contest. There have been many reforms or attempted reforms, first attempted by students, then by faculty members who created athletic committees, followed by conferences usually under faculty control, and through most of the 20th century by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) with presidentially appointed faculty representatives. Even university presidents have done a little reforming, though I might say that college presidents are generally cheerleaders for athletics, not reformers. For the most part, I have concluded in my book, *Pay for Play: A History of Big-Time College Athletic Reform* (Smith, 2011), that cheerleading presidents historically have been one of the major stumbling blocks to college athletic reform. It is also one of the major reasons why the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics has not been a huge success, for the Knight Commission consists almost entirely of presidents and ex-presidents of our colleges and universities. And, I would contend, the fact that the NCAA has been run by presidents or presidential appointees for about a century is a major reason why the NCAA has not been successful in many areas of academic-athletic reform. Cheerleaders do not reform athletics; they cheer them on.

Real athletic reform would mean to me that an athlete would be representative academically of the student body that she or he is representing. This is not true of the profit-making sports at Stanford University, where Michael received his Ph.D., or the University of Wisconsin, where I received mine. It is principally in the most commercialized and professionalized sports where athletes are not representative of their student bodies, football and men's basketball. There, presidential admits, called "set asides" by the Ivy League, dominate, and presidents set aside spaces for poor academic-performing but high athletic-performing individuals. It is unfortunate, but history indicates that presidents will not reform athletics to the point where athletes are academically representative of their student bodies.

The president, historically, who tried to do the most about reform in college athletics was Charles W. Eliot of Harvard. That was more than 100 years ago. Eliot did a study of Harvard football freshman players in the 1890s. President Eliot, probably the best known university president in American history, found that Harvard freshman football players during the season in the mid-1890s received more failing grades than the total of those who received As and Bs. He also noted that football players at Harvard received almost 10 times more Ds than As. His solution to the freshman problem—create the freshman ineligibility rule so that football would not interfere with "their studies at the worst possible time" (Smith, 1990, p. 181).

Within a few years, most of the big-time schools passed the freshman rule, not only for football players but also for all freshmen athletes. The freshman ineligibility rule became almost universal in the first 7 decades of the 20th century, until the NCAA did away with it during the Vietnam War. How many of the presidents ruling the NCAA would consider the re-institution of the freshman rule today? If presidents want to do something about athletic reform for academic reasons, they would re-institute the freshman rule that was unwisely done away with by NCAA's presidentially appointed representatives during the Vietnam War. Presidents would also reinstate the four-year (or five-year) athletic scholarship rule done away with about the same time. These two abolished rules were instrumental in leading college athletics to the depths of needing athletic-academic reform in the 1970s and 1980s, and the NCAA has not dug itself out of the depths since then.

Presently, Michael Oriard and I don't consider the APR (Academic Progress Rate) even close to a major reform, even though the previous president of the NCAA, Myles Brand, called the APR "the most far-reaching effort of its kind in the history of the NCAA" (Smith, 2011, p. 183). Brand may have been a fine philosopher, but he did not know his history. If Brand's statement is true, it does not say much about college athletic reform since December 29, 1905, when the NCAA was founded. I know there are different interpretations of the APR, but I believe the APR more than ever emphasizes athletic eligibility, not academic development of athletes. Athletics under the APR emphasizes eligibility at the expense of a real education. The APR has probably contributed greatly to the clustering of athletes in particular curriculums more than any other supposed reform in the history of the NCAA. Why do over 8 of 10 members of the University of Michigan's football team major in General Studies? Why do about three-quarters of Georgia Tech's baseball, basketball, and football team members major in Management? Why do Stanford football players cluster in Sociology? Or American Studies at Notre Dame, Communications at Wake Forest, Residential Property Management at Virginia Tech, Sociology at Duke, Sport Management at North Carolina State, Economics at Harvard, and Kinesiology at Rice, to name a few? I assume that the NCAA is presently studying clustering in its institutions, Division I through Division III, or if it is not doing so, it should do so without delay. Yes, Michael Oriard is correct about the problem of clustering, and the APR's pressure for maintaining eligibility, rather than promoting education, is greater now than ever, thanks greatly to the APR.

Oriard (2012) takes us back to the creation of the now defunct and nearly forgotten College Football Association (CFA) in the 1970s, when eventually the CFA-backed University of Oklahoma and University of Georgia waged a legal battle against the restricted television policy of the NCAA. Led by Georgia's cheerleading president Fred Davison, who was also president of the CFA, the CFA-backed lawsuit defeated the strictly controlled NCAA TV plan. The result was a rapid expansion of commercialized television in the hands of competing conferences and individual institutions. One of the leaders of the CFA was the coach at Penn State, Joe Paterno. It was Paterno who in 1981 threatened that the CFA would withdraw from the NCAA unless the NCAA gave more money from football television receipts to CFA members. Speaking of the NCAA TV contract, Paterno stated, "If we're led down the garden path [by the NCAA] one more time, it may be the last time" (Smith, 2001, p. 161). With the 1984 Supreme Court case breaking up the NCAA TV monopoly (*NCAA v. Board of Regents*, 1984), the biggest of the big-time conferences and institutions got what they wanted—money and power. It helped lead to big-time coaches becoming nearly instant millionaires and increasing their power within each individual institution, often with far more power than their school presidents.

Increased money also allowed the big-time football and men's basketball programs to set up "eligibility centers," often called academic-athletic counseling centers at each university. Pouring in 1 million or 2 million dollars into athletic counseling centers each year gave the richest schools a greater chance to keep athletes eligible. And generally speaking these counseling centers were separate from academic counseling centers and isolated from the regular university academic counselors. The insularity has tended to keep athletes away from academic eyes, whose vision might help to keep academic integrity within the counseling centers.

Presidents, who rule the NCAA, could put athletic counseling under academic control if they wished to do so. With university academic control of athletic counseling, there would be less likelihood, as Oriard has pointed out, of the athletic tutor scandals at Georgia, Louisiana State, Minnesota, Ohio State, and Tennessee—and elsewhere across the nation.

It appears to me that real academic reform in athletics is not likely to occur until at least two groups are brought into the equation, possibly three groups. Faculties are the first, for they should be most interested in academic integrity. Boards of Trustees are second, for they set university policy. Policy-setting trustees should be made responsible for the policies of the NCAA, yet they are not represented in the NCAA, and therefore can be irresponsible relative to the governing of athletics. Let those who set university policy on athletics at the institutional level be responsible for athletic policy at the national level. Let the faculty who set academic standards at the institutional level become influential in setting academic standards at the national level. Presently, the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) is generally listened to politely by the president-controlled NCAA, but then generally ignored. This should be reversed by incorporating COIA into the power structure of the NCAA. Though presidents may feel that giving faculty more power may diminish their own, I see it as helping presidents to achieve real academic reform in the NCAA and its institutions of higher learning. Presidents could, and should, reach out to academics if they have a mind to accomplish academic reform in intercollegiate athletics. Students who are athletes should also not be ignored. The question of how they should be involved in their own governance and involved in the reform equation needs to be debated and acted upon.

Since Oriard (2012) proposed no solutions to intercollegiate reform (though I know he has his own agenda), let me suggest several reforms that would help to raise the academic standards for athletes among NCAA institutions. First, immediately reinstate the freshman rule. Next, immediately reinstate the 4- (or 5-) year athletic scholarship. Third, create an official *ombudsperson* for athletes at each university, one appointed by the institution's faculty senate, not the president. Do not make this a presidential appointment, like the faculty representative. The ombudsperson should be completely independent of institutional presidential control and to be the hearing board for athletes.

A fourth solution is to demand faculty control over institutional academic affairs of athletes. This includes eliminating clustering of athletes in specific academic courses of study, revealing all academic majors of all athletes by sport, disclosing overall grade point averages given by instructors for athletes in all courses, and placing athletic counseling under university academic control. Next, officially recognize COIA as part of the NCAA ruling body, insuring that it is responsible for setting academic requirements for athletic participation. Sixth, ask Congress for partial anti-trust exemption so that the NCAA can control coaching salaries and compensation. This will allow universities to bring coaching salaries in line with academic salaries or at least in line with the salary of the dean of the medical school or business school. In addition, share athletic revenues more equally to reduce the financial incentive that may corrupt the system and further erode university academic values.

As an eighth reform, eliminate clothing-shoe contract money as coaching compensation, using it instead for worthy projects such as financially helping

athletes complete their undergraduate degrees or attending graduate school—or giving the money for academic scholarships to deserving individuals who are not athletes. Next, disallow coaches or administrators who are guilty of major NCAA violations from ever coaching or administrating in any post-season contest with that or another institution.

Finally, stop usage of the term “student athlete.” It would be controversial but valuable if the NCAA got rid of its half-century of official use of the term. I have written a 300-page book, *Pay for Play*, on the history of intercollegiate athletic reform and have never once used the term “student athlete,” or for that matter the terms “student musician,” “student journalist,” “student debater,” “student chemist,” or “student gymnast.” All college athletes are students, or should be. The term is no longer needed to preserve the vestige of amateurism and to thwart the threat of workers’ compensation and federal taxation.

I am, however, strongly in favor of athletes who are students. I love athletics, and I would love to have athletes more fully integrated into our universities. And I would like the NCAA, not Congress or the courts, to bring about real reform of college athletics.

In closing, I would say, unlike some critics, the NCAA has done a great deal of good for college athletics in its century and more of history. However, I would hope that the NCAA would listen to people like Michael Oriard, a former athlete and a present scholar, even hire him, to promote the integration of athletics into our institutions of higher education. While the research findings that Oriard and I have produced for decades may help put reform in a historical context, faculty at universities must be given power if we expect to improve academic integrity in athletics. Presidents are in a position through the NCAA to bring faculty once again into the power equation if they have a mind to do so.

References

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