

# Studying Intercollegiate Sports: High Stakes, Low Rewards<sup>1</sup>

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Research faculty seldom study sports on their campuses. This paper identifies the constraints that impede research on intercollegiate sports, noting that they are grounded in multiple sites over which no single organization has influence or control. These sites include the university, academic disciplines, local communities and the NCAA. Given these constraints, there must be strategies to support research, such as providing access to primary and secondary data, establishing grant programs, and eliciting support from campus and athletic department decision makers. If the NCAA wants to effectively encourage faculty research, there is a need for discussions of what counts as quality and how bias, ideology, and objectivity will be defined and identified. Finally, there also is a need to identify strategies for narrowing the gap between the currently different and sometimes conflicting cultures of academia and athletic departments. Only if that gap can be narrowed is there a possibility that research done by academic faculty will meaningfully inform decisions related to intercollegiate sports.

In his October 2007 NCAA President's Report, Myles Brand announced that in January 2008 there would be a Scholarly Colloquium organized around the question, "College Sports: A Legitimate Focus for Scholarly Inquiry?" He noted that intercollegiate sports have a profound impact on millions of people, and that the NCAA should encourage research that could inform policy decisions.

This paper discusses factors that currently constrain faculty research on intercollegiate sports, strategies for minimizing constraints and creating incentives, and issues related to the determination of research "quality." This discussion is followed by a brief discussion of existing research and a hopeful conclusion about what can be expected in the future.

## Factors Constraining Faculty Research on Intercollegiate Sports

In the first section of the paper I identify four sets of factors that inhibit research by academic faculty. These factors are located in the university, the community, traditional academic disciplines, and the NCAA.

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## University Constraints

First of all, studying the immediate contexts of our everyday lives is challenging. We often take for granted the events and routines that frame our daily experiences and don't see them as topics to be studied. Being immersed in these contexts makes it difficult to view them critically, especially when faculty achieve enough status to have a vested interest in maintaining them as they are. Studying valued traditions and rituals in our social worlds is especially challenging because research often exposes their inconsistencies, internal contradictions, and taken-for-granted ideological foundations.

Secondly, it is risky to study traditions and rituals that serve the interests of powerful people in our social worlds, including our campuses. As some of us know well, research can create quite a fuss when it exposes the problematic aspects of intercollegiate sports. This is why studies of intercollegiate sports, when they are done, tend to be historical and descriptive rather than critical and analytical. Most faculty members understand that it is risky to do research that threatens what is valued by powerful university administrators or influential university benefactors. Therefore, unless they are asked to study intercollegiate sports, most researchers won't jeopardize their careers doing so when there are many other topics they can study. Why take the chance of doing research that could attract negative attention from the people who sign your paychecks, approve promotions and tenure awards, allocate university resources, or influence campus decisions with major donations?

Third, when researchers cannot design studies that directly serve athletic department needs, they're not likely to gain access to much useful data on intercollegiate sports, especially data on the experiences of athletes and the internal dynamics of teams and athletic departments. Relevant here is that many athletic departments are characterized by institutionalized suspicion. Although this suspicion is justifiable in some cases, it generally precludes collecting data from representative samples of athletes or teams. Furthermore, some teams have cultures organized around the belief that outsiders are not to be trusted because they cannot understand how the athletes give meaning to their experiences and to each other as members of sport-specific social worlds. These cultures are sustained partly by a vocabulary stressing that team members are "family," and that survival and success depend on sticking together and providing mutual support in the face of a potentially hostile world. Further, the people in that world cannot know what it means to be part of a select group that is dedicated to a sport and willing to pay the price, make sacrifices, and play through pain for the sake of membership. Entering such a culture and gaining the trust of athletes is impossible without the consent of the head coach and assistants. This means that collecting valid and reliable data about intercollegiate sports requires administrative, athletic department, and coach support in addition to the interest and commitment of research faculty and their ability to develop rapport with people who create and live within sport cultures—a rare combination indeed.

This point is not made to malign athletic departments or coaches. All of us know that it is risky to allow others to critically scrutinize our lives when their interests may not overlap with ours, reality television notwithstanding. Those who control access to data on intercollegiate sports realize that researchers are more interested in discovery and knowledge production than win-loss records and other athletic

department priorities. Therefore, when coaches and athletic directors have the power to do so, they close their teams and athletes off to researchers—unless, of course, they commission a study in which the findings are reported only to them and never made public. This is not new and it's the reason why public knowledge is grounded in research that focuses on the poor rather than the powerful; on employees rather than employers; and on lower division undergraduate students in introductory courses rather than deans and administrators.

The validity and reliability problems created by restricted access to data certainly discourage many serious researchers from studying intercollegiate sports, apart from doing descriptive studies or those designed specifically to enhance player performance and team success. There are a few notable exceptions to this rule, including Patti and Peter Adler's research summarized in their book *Backboards and Blackboards: College Athletes and Role Engulfment* (1991). But most exceptions, including the Adlers' research, involve studies of single teams or small, unrepresentative samples of athletes; they may not be seen as credible by journal review boards; and they may elicit nasty public critiques when they're published. Mounting a defense against these critiques is difficult when data are limited. In any case, these studies are not likely to earn the merit needed to maintain one's status as a member of a research faculty.

## Discipline Constraints

Further limiting research on intercollegiate sports is the low priority given across nearly all academic disciplines to physical culture as a research topic. Knowledge production in US universities has long been based on clear-cut mind–body distinctions. An uncritical acceptance of Cartesian mind–body dualism has lead researchers to ignore bodies or relegate them to the repair shops located in university medical schools or departments that focus on body mechanics. Unlike scholars in Asian cultures, where widely used ontological approaches assume mind–body integration as the foundation for being human, US scholars seldom acknowledge that human existence is embodied or that clearly embodied activities, such as sports, ought to be studied seriously.

This intellectual climate has made physical education such an oxymoron that it has all but disappeared from the curriculum in many US schools—from kindergarten to doctoral programs. There are a few universities where it has survived under cover of kinesiology and human performance departments, but it is not viewed as academically legitimate by researchers who treat bodies as fleshy machines to be examined in laboratories part by disembodied part. As a result, sports and other forms of physical culture remain risky topics for research, and there is little funding for those of us who think otherwise. As my colleagues have told me, “If you want to study athletes, do a proposal with faculty from the medical school.” As a result, there are few studies of the embodied student experience, on or off the field.

## Community Constraints

Another source of factors inhibiting research on intercollegiate sports is the local community, especially when powerful and influential people are boosters of intercollegiate sport programs and want them to grow, maintain near perfect records, and

attract more spectators. Many such boosters have long accepted the unsupportable ideology that sports build character and are essentially pure activities sullied only by “bad apples,” mostly in the form of undisciplined athletes and unscrupulous outsiders such as agents or gamblers. This may lead them to help recruit coaches who can effectively control athletes but it doesn’t make them supportive of research that helps us understand the connection between intercollegiate sports and higher education.

Research that threatens the interests of these boosters invites attention that few scholars are prepared for or willing to confront. When this attention takes the form of critical attacks it often has a negative impact on a scholar’s career and turns his or her everyday life into a tedious exercise in self-defense. Defusing criticism with logic and data are difficult because it is usually infused with emotions and grounded in the personal interests of people who don’t see the point of asking critical questions about the things that provide them pleasure, prestige, and profit. Furthermore, unless a researcher has an established relationship with journalists it is likely that influential boosters can frame a public discussion of issues in ways that put a scholar at a distinct disadvantage when trying to explain and defend a research project. When local media are networked with regional and national media, the stakes associated with media coverage increase, and defending one’s scholarly reputation can become a full time job. After seeing noteworthy examples of this over the past two decades, why would scholars at any point in their academic careers risk studying intercollegiate sports, unless, of course, they can present results acceptable to all the nonacademic stakeholders? But that’s no basis for quality research.

## **NCAA Constraints**

Finally, and especially germane to this conference, the NCAA is a source of factors inhibiting research on intercollegiate sports. As an organization, the NCAA is rightfully dedicated to representing the interests of its member institutions. In this capacity it gathers massive amounts of quantitative data and has an able research staff that constantly analyzes them to answer questions raised privately by NCAA committees. Some of these data, often in numerically aggregated forms, appear in NCAA reports, but they have limited usefulness for faculty interested in doing analytical research. Apart from working on an NCAA research project, it is impossible for research faculty to gather data that would rival data already possessed by the NCAA—or within its reach on relatively short notice.

To understand the practical implications of this issue, imagine that I pulled together a few resources to do a qualitative study of the postuniversity lives of 30 former Division I athletes whose eligibility in football or men’s basketball expired before they graduated. My resources are very limited, and I control expenses by including only former athletes who live in two metropolitan areas that are less than a 2-hour drive from my office. My graduate assistant and I work hard to collect valid and reliable data through in-depth interviews, and our analysis identifies a clear pattern: that is, chronic career problems occur frequently among athletes who received no posteligibility support from their university and athletic departments as they attempted to complete their degrees. In fact, the former athletes were unemployed for significantly more months and had lower incomes and lower status jobs than peers who spent a similar number of years in college. Imagine too, that

this finding is reported in a widely read newspaper article that sparks many letters to the editor. Journalists call me and ask for details that I cannot provide without violating the privacy rights of the young men in my study. When I respond in general terms, subsequent letters question my credibility and suggest that I have personal reasons to put college sports in a bad light, or they accuse my university of being guilty of using and then losing athletes in revenue producing sports.

Let's ignore, for the moment, my university president, athletic director, and the highly paid football and men's basketball coaches, and ask: what if the NCAA has previously unreported data showing that former athletes, on average, have relatively favorable career success rates? Would they, in the interest of their member institutions, call a press conference and present data that contradict my study? If they did this, would others use those data to discredit my research and raise questions about my status as a scholar?

This scenario may sound farfetched, but my point is that the NCAA is unwittingly and unintentionally positioned to inhibit research on intercollegiate sports. This is mostly because academic researchers do not know whether the research questions they want to ask have already been asked and answered privately by NCAA researchers working with internal committees, or whether data have already been collected by the NCAA and could be presented in forms that would be widely defined as more credible than studies done by individual research faculty.

This scenario is not presented to question the motives of NCAA research staff or the integrity of NCAA officers obliged to act in the service of their members. It is presented only to highlight the politics of research, an issue that evokes interest from any of us sensitive to the hazards of investigating issues that concern powerful others who possess resources and a position of influence that no individual scholar can match. This doesn't mean that research faculty cannot effectively work with NCAA staff on particular NCAA sponsored projects—something I'll suggest later in this paper; nor does it mean that the NCAA are not interested in certain types of research done by academic scholars. However, it does mean that research faculty with a mandate to produce knowledge, often by asking critical questions about the world, and NCAA researchers with a mandate to ask questions consistent with the organization's mission and the interests of member institutions, have goals that often differ. This is not a minor point.

## **Minimizing Constraints and Creating Incentives**

In light of constraints faced by research faculty, it's not surprising that in-depth studies of intercollegiate sports are relatively scarce despite President Brand's observation that college athletics has a profound impact on millions of people. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that doing independent, critical research on intercollegiate sports can be a high-stakes exercise. It triggers responses from powerful people who are motivated by strong emotional, ideological, and financial interests in the status and public perception of sport teams and programs.

These constraints are not listed in the recent Knight Commission study of Faculty Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletics, but they can be used, in part, as explanations of the findings presented in their report (Lawrence, Hendricks, & Ott, 2007). For those who don't know, this report is based on a survey of 2000 tenured

and tenure-track faculty members at 23 NCAA Division I universities that are in the Football Bowl Subdivision, that is, Division IA. The sample was intentionally drawn to overrepresent faculty involved in campus governance and experienced in teaching athletes in their courses. In other words, these are faculty *most likely* interested in and concerned about intercollegiate sports on their campus.

The survey was designed by researchers at The University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. Its goal was to identify faculty beliefs and concerns about intercollegiate sports, faculty satisfaction with the athletic programs on their campus, faculty willingness to participate in efforts to rectify problems they perceive in those programs, and an overall sense among faculty of the possibility for meaningful changes in the athletic program on their campus.

In summary, the data from this study indicate that faculty see intercollegiate sports as an auxiliary enterprise on their campus, tied as much to the entertainment industry as to education. They are generally dissatisfied because they lack knowledge about intercollegiate programs and have no control over decisions related to athletic departments. They are interested in intercollegiate sports and the athletic department on their campus, but perceive them to be a low priority faculty governance issue. Overall, faculty also believe that campus administrators do not want their input on matters related to intercollegiate sports and that current decision-making structures have no clearly defined role for faculty involvement. As a result they are generally disengaged from sports on their campuses.

The authors of the Knight Commission report suggest that a lack of knowledge about key athletic department policies and practices is the major factor constraining faculty engagement with intercollegiate sports. To the extent that this is true, the first and most important strategy for stimulating research on intercollegiate sports is to institutionalize the dissemination of information about the athletic department, sport teams, and athletes to the faculty. This type of transparency can be managed to respect the privacy rights of individuals involved, but it must be done so that faculty acquire a knowledge foundation upon which to propose, initiate, and complete quality research on intercollegiate sports. Additionally, this strategy should be planned in ways that provide research faculty with some form of access to data collected by the NCAA. Again, this can occur in many ways, but there's an urgent need for NCAA officials and research staff to meet with faculty representatives to discuss how this can occur so that faculty knowledge of research possibilities is established at the same time that individual privacy rights are respected. (I realize that the NCAA has ethical responsibilities in handling the data they collect, but research faculty have similar ethical responsibilities and have established institutionalized processes to insure that they are taken seriously when research is proposed and initiated.)

The second strategy for reducing constraints is to provide research grants. Researchers are very predictable actors: they follow data and live on grants. Without data access and grant support, they wither and are eventually trimmed from the academic vine. At present, most research on intercollegiate sports is self-funded by those willing to risk that it won't be a waste of their personal resources or compromise their careers. But these studies seldom involve large enough samples or data sets to make major contributions to knowledge or policy decisions; consequently, some people might say that they lack the quality and objectivity that

is often attributed to research based on adequate funding and data. To combine possible funding with the rising tension between perceived academic and athletic department needs would certainly make more faculty across many disciplines willing to propose and initiate research. If they had support they could do studies that are methodologically sound and able to withstand the critical scrutiny of everyone from local boosters and sports writers to journal review boards and promotion and tenure committees.

About this time last year we heard from President Brand that simply sponsoring a conference and inviting scholars to submit manuscripts does not elicit enough quality research papers to fill a conference program. But if there is a genuine interest in fostering quality research, there's a need to present concrete forms of support that reaffirm public statements. Funding is one form of support; access to data is another; and yet another is to lobby the presidents, top academic officers, athletic directors, and coaches in NCAA member institutions to facilitate research and cooperate with researchers. Initiating this publication, the *Journal of Intercollegiate Sports* will, by itself, do little to stimulate quality research; it will unify the literature, but it won't stimulate additional research without other incentives. (NOTE: There already are two journals devoted exclusively to education or higher education and sport, and many other journals readily accept articles on intercollegiate sports.)

A third strategy for fostering research is to commission brainstorming/focus groups consisting of faculty, athletic directors, coaches, athletes, and journalists so each group can identify and prioritize research topics from their perspectives. Collating these topics into one or multiple lists would stimulate research projects and enable researchers to document the need for the studies they propose in grant applications. Funding agencies often consider the relative importance of research topics when awarding grants, so lists of systematically prioritized topics would help researchers obtain the support they need to do quality research.

A fourth strategy would be to do a study of the experiences of faculty, academic support personnel, and others who have experienced negative consequences when raising issues about intercollegiate sports. If we knew more about the patterns of their experiences we might be able to assist campus administrators in efforts to produce more transparency in programs related to athletics. For example, maybe the NCAA needs an independent ombudsperson who can advocate the interests of scholars and other university personnel concerned enough about issues of academic integrity to do research and to identify problems.

## **What Counts as Quality? The Messy Business of Identifying Bias, Ideology, and Objectivity**

When discussing strategies to encourage quality research in a forum such as this, there's a need to identify concrete examples of the "*objective research*" that President Brand hopes will "inform future policy decisions" related to intercollegiate sports. "*Objective research*," he explains in a recent newsletter, is based on "non-biased non-ideological perspectives." This explanation is helpful, but before launching multiple studies of intercollegiate sports, potential researchers will want to know more about the ways that people making policy decisions at the NCAA identify bias, ideology, and objectivity.

As a sociologist lucky enough to have seen, studied, and discussed sports in many parts of the world, I'm keenly aware that all research, regardless of discipline, is conceived, funded, performed, presented, given meaning, and applied in particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. Science provides us with tools and processes to control overt personal interests, along with *known and identifiable* biases and ideologies as we *perform* and *present* research, but it does not provide tools to control these factors when we *conceive, fund, give meaning to, and apply* research. Further, traditional science does a relatively poor job helping us identify the biases and ideologies that are so deeply embedded in our culture and experience that they can exist without notice for long periods of time. Therefore, when we consider a call for "*objective research*," we should know in advance what counts as bias and ideology.

I realize that this is a nitpicky point, but nits can be irritating, and I know people who define bias and ideology in ways that dismiss nearly all scientific research done over the last two centuries. They point out that this research was based almost exclusively on the observational vantage points and unrecognized gender, racial, and class ideologies used by relatively privileged white European men and their North American counterparts. Therefore, the studies they did were conceived, funded, performed, presented, given meaning, and applied in ways that are certainly not objective—and generally riddled by bias and ideology that is apparent to many people today.

Now before you stop reading this article because of this point, let me say that I don't take this position. However, I do recognize that ideologies are webs of ideas and beliefs that often are so tightly woven into the very fabric of our culture that they influence how we view, ask questions about, and make sense of the world and our experiences in it. These webs often are difficult to see, and we don't know they exist until we feel them touch us or until a revelatory light hits them at a particular angle. Even when we try to wipe them away, they continue to exist in hard to see places, and they often are rewoven after we've tried to eliminate them.

Before I make my point about what counts as quality, let me present a more poignant metaphor used by Bruce Kidd, a colleague at the University of Toronto. Bruce says that ideology is like body odor—we smell it in others but seldom sense our own. Like certain ideologies, the odor of our own body is such a constant in our lives that it constitutes our sense of normal and natural—the "right way" for a body to be. That's why most of us are surprised and defensive when someone calls us on one of our ideologies and shows how it subjectivizes our sense making of reality. Being unaware of our ideologies or accepting them uncritically leads us to resist questioning them; in fact, the *modus operandi* of most people is to seek facts, stories, and even research that reaffirm ideologies, especially those we regularly use to make sense of and give meaning to the social worlds we experience. Therefore, when I present research showing that sports are organized in many different ways, and that they are sometimes experienced, defined, and integrated into people's lives to produce negative developmental consequences, people for whom "sports build character" is a core ideological belief are surprised. When I deconstruct the ideology organized around this belief and identify its origins and implications, many people become defensive and pepper me with anecdotes they've used for years to support their previously unquestioned assumptions about sports. When I compare their anecdotes with my research results and explain the difference, some people



become downright angry and dismiss me by saying my negativism undermines all that is sacred and true in the world.

So, here's my point: when President Brand calls for "non-biased, non-ideological perspectives to provide objective research," we need to know how he and those who will make future policy decisions at the NCAA identify biased and ideological perspectives. For example, if a researcher designed a study based on the assumption that intercollegiate sports have positive educational benefits, would the resulting research be identified as nonbiased, nonideological, and objective? What if a researcher designed a study based on the assumption that intercollegiate sports have many consequences and that negative ones are important to document; would the resulting research be identified as nonbiased, nonideological, and objective? Let's go one step further: Suppose the former study found evidence of positive educational outcomes and concluded with a passionate and strongly worded endorsement of intercollegiate sports; would people characterize the study as polemical? Similarly, if the latter study found evidence of negative consequences and concluded with a passionate and strongly worded criticism of intercollegiate sports, would people characterize the study as polemical?

I don't know the answers to these questions, but I hypothesize that people who believe that sport builds character (a powerful belief integrated into widely accepted and seldom critiqued ideologies related to competition, gender, authority) would characterize the first study as nonbiased, nonideological, objective and justifiably used to present a passionate and strong argument in support of intercollegiate programs. At the same time, they'd be likely to characterize the second study as biased, ideological, subjective, and polemical. I haven't tested this hypothesis, but it leads me to state that we must have a frank discussion about what counts as bias, ideology, objectivity, and polemics when it comes to research on intercollegiate sports.<sup>2</sup> Without this discussion, a "commitment to quality" may actually subvert future research rather than inspiring it.

As we have this discussion it is important to take stock of existing research and determine what studies are most needed in the immediate future.

## Existing Research on Intercollegiate Sports

Constraints faced by research faculty have strongly influenced the academic literature on intercollegiate sports. I assembled a 20-page bibliography of journal articles and academic books that focus directly on intercollegiate sports, and it was clear that most of the references did not include systematically collected or original data. When data were used as a basis for comments, critiques, and conclusions, they had generally been collected by others, including the NCAA and various news organizations and journalists.

About 60% of all the references focused on organizational issues such as participation rates and numbers; the need for reform, graduation rates; gender equity; the racial composition of players, coaches and administrators; the characteristics of athletes, alumni contributions; athletes' rights; and the general characteristics of conferences and the NCAA.

The next largest category—about 18 % of the references—focused on behavioral issues such as hazing, crime rates, alcohol consumption, drug and

performance enhancing substance use, various other forms of deviance, ethics and fairness, choice making and identity, academic choices and patterns, and the use of or responses to racial and gender stereotypes.

References on the actual experiences of athletes were relatively scarce, constituting less than 15% of the total. They focused topics such as on career plans and transitions, retirement from competitive sports, strategies for dealing with gender issues or racism, relationships with teammates, the experience of pain and injury, identity formation, motivation on and off the field, and general educational experiences.

The remaining references—about 10%—focused on a range of disparate topics including faculty attitudes and perceptions, media coverage, sponsorships, spectators, and community and business issues, among others.

The substance and overall distribution of references reflects issues of risk, restricted access to data, and resource scarcity. All but a few of the references focus on Division I programs and so-called revenue producing sports, even though these sports involve less than 8% of all intercollegiate athletes (in 2006). Description is common in the literature; detailed analysis is scarce. Apart from studies sponsored or done by the NCAA and the Knight Foundation, empirical studies used data that came from single-campus and single-sport case studies, very small samples, or limited secondary sources.

A number of references are noteworthy in terms of their contributions to what we know about intercollegiate sports, but knowledge remains seriously limited. There's almost no research on Divisions II and III, even though 60% of all intercollegiate athletes play on teams in those divisions. Little is known about sports that are not revenue generating, although they involve between 80 and 90 % of all intercollegiate sport teams and athletes.

On a very practical level, there are no detailed studies that would help decision makers at Division II institutions determine if and when they should make a move to Division I, or decision makers at Division III institutions confident about staying where they are or making a move to Division II. How will such moves affect perceptions of the campus, campus culture and social activities, athletic department culture, athlete recruitment and the characteristics of athletes recruited, racial and ethnic issues on campus, coach recruitment and the characteristics of coaches, faculty–athletic department relationships, capital expenditures and revenue generation, among many other issues. In addition to aggregated quantitative data for institutions that have made such moves there is a need for a series of case studies that would highlight a full range of issues that must be considered and anticipated by decision makers.

There are many critiques of intercollegiate sports among the references, but they focus almost exclusively on DI revenue-producing teams, especially football and men's basketball. For nearly a century now, these critiques have presented various forms of data leading to the amazingly consistent conclusion that the commercial–professional character of these sports creates a context that often undermines educational goals and that changes are needed to enhance their educational relevance. Despite the number and consistency of these critiques, and the passion with which they have been presented, the sports they identify have become increasingly commercial and professionalized during the entire last century and the first 8 years of this one.

Unfortunately, little is known about the impact of commercialization and professionalization on the everyday experiences of young men and women on high profile teams, how they give meaning to those experiences, how they integrate them into their lives, and the effectiveness of various strategies for dealing with all the things that come with professionalization and commercialization. For example, last week we read in *USA Today* (January 2, 2008; p. 10A) that 90%, 53%, and 44% of the football players graduate from Boston College, Ohio State, and the University of Oklahoma, respectively. But does anyone what those graduation success rates really mean in terms of the lives of the athletes; the cultures of the campuses, athletic departments, teams, and local communities; the backgrounds and identities of the athletes; family income and racial differences between athletes and other students; athlete-coach relationships; classroom and faculty issues; booster issues; parental influences on athletes; social life issues for athletes; etc., etc.

I can offer at least half dozen reasonable and very different explanations for those GSRs. As long as we have only aggregate statistics without additional research that helps us understand them in terms of the actual experiences of athletes, it would seem to me that the odds of making effective policy decisions are low enough to make administrators nervous, unless they are concerned more with impression management than the reality of intercollegiate sports. (Furthermore, there is a need for a case study of Vanderbilt and Gordon Gee's "experiment" there: Is it really working? Will it fail? What factors have and will influence its success or failure?)

Many people reading this article know that the most detailed recent analysis of the educational implications of intercollegiate sports was done by James Shulman and William Bowen (2001), respected experts on higher education. They analyzed data from 1951 through the 1990s for thirty colleges and universities that have highly selective admissions policies. They found that intercollegiate sports have "hidden costs" that most people overlook in published research and polemical discussions. When the initial Shulman and Bowen study was extended through follow-up research (Bowen and Levin, 2003; Bowen, Kurzweil, Tobin, & Pichler, 2005), it became clear to the researchers that there was increasing tension between core educational values and decisions that favor intercollegiate sports in admissions and budget allocations. They didn't expect this tension to be so pronounced on campuses known for their educational quality rather than the prowess of their sport teams. However, it was inferred that it had been increasing since the 1980s, so that a growing number of faculty currently believe that academic quality suffers when athletic teams require escalating resources for recruiting, training and travel expenses, and constructing facilities that have no empirically established educational or research function.

As expected, this research evoked widespread controversy. Bowen and his colleagues responded to criticisms by saying that their work was not based on an antisport ideological perspective and that they used accepted research methods that maximize analytical objectivity. However, the quality (and objectivity) of their research was attacked in a variety of ways with many people noting that their data did not represent all institutions with sport programs, or all team or all athletes. Of course, this was true, but it was also true that the data came from academic institutions that most of us would see as less likely than most others to compromise educational funding or academic quality for the sake of athletics.

Additional criticisms, especially those in the popular press, were organized around examples of and testimonies from former athletes whose biographies seemed to contradict part of the analysis. Many of these testimonial criticisms appeared to be at least partly grounded in personal defensiveness even though Bowen and his colleagues, out of respect for the privacy rights of students, had clearly noted that their findings were not to be used to make conclusions about individual athletes who had attended or were currently attending these institutions.

Despite these criticisms, I want to identify a few among many of the findings in this research that should be taken seriously enough to create a call for further research through which the work of Shulman and Bowen can be more accurately interpreted and used as a basis for policy decisions and/or structural reforms in intercollegiate sports. These include the following:

- Students recruited as athletes are regularly given greater advantage in college admissions decisions than the relatives of alumni or underrepresented minorities.
- The difference between the ACT/SAT scores of recruited athletes and other students has grown consistently since the late 1980s, with athletes scoring significantly lower on these tests than other students admitted to the same schools.
- Since the late 1980s, the academic performance of athletes has been consistently lower than expected on the basis of their test scores and other factors considered in the admissions process; and underperformance is most likely when athletes are exclusively immersed in a sport culture in which athletic excellence is the central focus of their lives.
- The lives of athletes on college campuses have become increasingly different and separate from the lives of other students, due mostly to their immersion in a sport culture in which year round training and continuous togetherness with teammates is expected.
- As the emphasis and per-student funding dedicated to intercollegiate sport teams have increased, the popularity, status, and per-student funding of other extracurricular activities have decreased, even though other activities are controlled more directly by students, have more clearly documented positive and complimentary educational outcomes, and cost far less than sport teams.

Of course, there are limitations to the studies by Bowen and his colleagues, but their findings identify issues that have not been empirically identified so clearly in previous research. Further, their findings provide the basis for literally dozens of significant research hypotheses that could launch a wide range of studies that would have important policy implications in addition to making contributions to knowledge about higher education, the organization and dynamics of extracurricular activities on university campuses, and the role that students play in their own educational development. These studies beg for support.

More typical of the empirical research on intercollegiate sports is the data summary on the status of women in college sports provided regularly by Vivian Acosta and Linda Carpenter and the data on the status of racial and ethnic minorities and women provided by Richard Lapchick (see citations in the bibliography). These data summaries complement data collected by the NCAA and individual

universities, but they are presented in forms that make them very easy to use in discussions of policies, practices, and possible changes in intercollegiate sports. However, I'm not aware of any institutionalized process through which this is done in universities, conferences, or NCAA divisions.

I don't have time to list additional noteworthy examples of independent research that could be used to inform policy decisions on intercollegiate sports. The research may not be as deep and comprehensive as we'd like, but it does exist. However, there are no institutionalized procedures for including the findings from this research in the planning or policy discourses that occur among decision makers in intercollegiate sports. This may be due to the academic-athletic department culture gap identified by Shulman and Bowen, but we need research on this. Until this research is done I think it is reasonable to assume that people in athletic departments are skeptical of research done by research faculty who are committed primarily to the production and distribution of knowledge. As long as this gap is maintained by those living on either side of it, research faculty are not likely to view studies of sports as a useful activity in their professional careers and people whose livelihoods depend on intercollegiate sports are not likely to facilitate faculty research that might influence decisions about their reputations and livelihoods.

## **Conclusion, but not The End**

Before you think I'm concluding with a Rodney King like plea for all of us to get along, I want to state clearly that there are real and important conflicts between the culture and goals of academic faculties and the culture and goals of most athletic departments—although I can't give you specific numbers because there's no empirical research on this topic. As far as careers and paychecks go, the definitions of merit in these two realms are very different. Ideas and beliefs about learning and teaching as well the processes through which learning and teaching occur are very different. Academic faculty question the educational relevance of sports because athletic departments and teams don't use traditional curricula or processes of evaluation that document learning and teaching in terms allowing them to see "education in operation." Athletic department administrators and coaches feel that faculty do not understand what and how they teach and cannot do research that would assist them in meeting the expectations that dominate their lives. The width of the academia-athletic department culture gap varies from one institution to another, but it's a rare campus, even in the NCAA Division III category, where the gap is narrow enough to allow regular, constructive, and policy-informing communication.

Let me give you an example. Now that I'm retired and don't have a semester-to-semester teaching schedule, I write and do public speaking. But my favorite activity is to go to a campus for a week or two as a "scholar-in-residence," present a general campus lecture and do a series of presentations in classes covering topics related to the sociology of sport. I meet with students and faculty and let people know that I'd also like to meet coaches and athletes, if people are willing. When I was a scholar-in-residence for a week last April (2007) at Hobart and William

Smith Colleges in Geneva, NY, my visit was arranged by faculty who wanted to bridge the academia–athletic department culture gap and facilitate constructive conversations between people from both sides. But for the reasons I just mentioned, this did not occur as they hoped. I even led a focus group–like discussion involving faculty, athletic directors, coaches, and athletes—about 15 people in all. I’m not a trained focus group leader but issues from both sides of the gap were put on the table so that we could at least begin to brainstorm possible gap reducing strategies. After two hours of generally cordial interaction, we had progressed to the point where two faculty members and two coaches agreed that they’d try to meet and discuss things further and in more concrete terms. But I wasn’t optimistic that this commitment would lead to more than friendly relationships that didn’t exist before, and I would have bet my honorarium that it wouldn’t narrow the gap at an institutional level.

As I sat on the plane flying back to Denver, I wondered what I could have done to more effectively instigate change at the institutional level. Further, I was discouraged by knowing that if I failed to bridge the gap at Hobart and William Smith Colleges where commercialism and dreams of playing professional sports were practically nonexistent, what could I do elsewhere? My sense of discouragement was exacerbated by the memory of another failure. Between 1983 and 1990 I worked to found and administer a center designed in part to prevent the formation of an academia–athletic department culture gap as a new intercollegiate sport program was developed on campus. I was dedicated to this task; I did it for no pay and it added about 15 hr a week to a workload that was already beyond normal expectations. But as the athletic department grew the gap formed and grew consistently wider, despite what I thought were creative strategies. (Actually, this is a long and interesting story.)

Then I began to wallow in discouragement when I thought of what could be done at the University of Colorado campus in Boulder where a lawsuit involving the football team and its staff recently settled for an amount that would fund at least 100 good studies of how to bridge the academia–athletic department culture gap. For me or anyone else to think that funds would be dedicated to such research rather than an insurance policy to cover the next such lawsuit is unrealistic—and probably pure fantasy.

After presenting and revising this paper, I’d like to feel more hopeful than I did in the spring of 2007. There is much we need to know about the sport experiences of the young people on thousands of diverse and variously organized intercollegiate teams. How do they integrate those experiences into their lives? When does this integration serve, interfere with, or directly undermine educational goals? How can research encourage those whose ideas are currently based on sport–builds–character ideologies think more critically about intercollegiate sports and education? I could add pages of additional research questions, but they would be identified with me and the academic side of the gap even though I spent a number of years on the other side as well. This means that the questions must emerge out of a continuously sponsored series of gap–jumping conversations focused on improving higher education as an embodied experience.

## Notes

1. This is a revised version of a presentation made at the Scholarly Colloquium on College Sports Nashville, TN, January 10–11.
2. “Objectivity” is an elusive goal in science. In reality it is based on intersubjectivities that lead a community of scholars to agree about what counts as unbiased, nonideological, and nondogmatic.
3. Instead of identifying all the literature I consulted while doing this paper, I’ve worked with and coordinated the efforts of many scholars in constructing the bibliography published in this issue (pp. 147–169) and available online at [www.HumanKinetics.com/JIS](http://www.HumanKinetics.com/JIS).

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