

## Reaction to Coakley

**Margaret Carlisle Duncan**  
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

With one minor quibble, I agree with Jay Coakley on almost all the arguments he advanced, in particular, those that point out the reasons for the gap between the often opposed cultures of academics and athletic departments. What might be most helpful at this juncture is for me to illustrate Jay's points using my own examples, many of which highlight why and how this culture gap exists. These examples are not all drawn specifically from college sports settings, but they all involve sports and academics and provide us with useful analogies. In most of these instances, interests collide in a way that makes it hard for groups to understand and communicate with each other. Keep in mind that these examples are not intended to illustrate personal idiosyncrasy, animosity, or the superiority of one group over another but rather to show that conflicting interests are generated by the structure of events and institutions.

First, I should mention that the role of a sport sociologist, which is what I am, is to question taken-for-granted assumptions and common-sense understandings of the world. That means that no matter how much we love sports, we tend to regard some aspects of them with skepticism. This makes us automatic antagonists for those who are not professional critics.

In this article, I begin by illustrating the culture gap on my campus. I follow up with several examples of public discourse that again reveal that gap, and I end by returning to Jay's article and my one quibble with what he says. Finally, I sketch my conclusion.

Let me describe an incident involving the culture of sport at my university, the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. Several years ago I was invited to serve on a university committee that functions as an advisory body to the Athletic Department. I accepted this assignment with enthusiasm. A few weeks before the fall semester started, the Athletic Department secretary sent me free tickets to all the athletic events. It turned out that this was one of the perks of serving on the Athletic Board. In what must have seemed like an egregious example of looking a gift horse in the mouth, I brought up conflict of interest at the first meeting of the year and wondered if the tickets should be returned. (Here I should mention that our Athletic Department is exemplary in many respects. During my tenure on the committee I was impressed by the athletic director and many of the people who worked in that department.) As a newbie, my first thought was that free tickets to all the games could function as a kind of bribe assuring that committee members

---

The author is with the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Department of Human Movement Sciences, Milwaukee, WI.

would be favorably disposed to Athletic Department initiatives. I had imagined we would have a lively debate over this issue but was totally unprepared for the red hot waves of hostility emanating in my direction. One committee member in particular responded viciously and personally to my suggestion. Needless to say, there was no dispassionate give-and-take, and I shut up for the rest of the meeting.

Here is a second example of how the culture of sport functions on my campus. I teach the basic introductory course for exercise and fitness majors, Introduction to Kinesiology. After a few years of offering this class to first-year undergraduate students, I learned to expect human movement science students to react to the words *fat*, *obese*, and *overweight* like a bull responds to a red cloth waving in the wind. Fat people became (and continue to be) targets for my students' finely honed sense of righteous indignation.

For example, after showing the Introductory class a documentary called *Big as Life: Obesity in America*, I asked my students to react to a statement that one of the interviewees made: "I'm troubled by the fact that fat people are so abused by society." One student remarked,

In a way it makes me feel bad for people that are fat. But then again I don't feel bad because most of the fat people aren't trying to do anything about it. But honestly, it's hard to hear people actually say that . . . [they] can't help being fat, it runs in their family. They should do something about their body, stop eating so much and exercise three to four times a week.

Another student declared,

People aren't usually born fat; there usually is something that triggers it. So it really is their fault. They're abused because people get frustrated when they see people eating whatever they want all the time. They ate their way to this abuse.

Why do these students have so little tolerance for something that doesn't even impinge directly on their lives? I finally figured out that most of these students come from an athletic culture; most of them were skilled members of high school sports teams, and that is why they take the course in the first place. In another words, they are self-selecting. They are heavily invested in the cult of the body beautiful, and often their own bodies closely resemble the athletic ideal. The media and experts like the Surgeon General have told them from a very early age that obesity is the enemy, and America's waistline is expanding because of laziness and self-indulgence. In short, my students see fat as evidence of a moral failing. When I try to tell them otherwise, when I mention research that suggests fat is an extremely complex issue with a basis in genetics, environment, and culture, things that most people are powerless to change, I am threatening one of their most cherished beliefs. Again, the culture gap is evident.

I'd like to move now from the culture of sport on my own campus to an example from the wider public discourse surrounding sport, but again with an emphasis on the collision of interests. This is a classic example of groups with opposing interests, in this case, the media versus academia. In 1989, a colleague and I wrote a grant proposal to examine gender portrayals in televised sport. It was funded by the former Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles (now called the LA84

Foundation), a nonprofit organization whose mission is “to serve youth through sport and to increase knowledge of sport and its impact on people’s lives.” My colleague, Michael Messner, and I spent hours analyzing sports broadcasts during the evening news, the televised NCAA men’s and women’s basketball games, and the televised US Tennis Open.

We found evidence of pervasive and unmistakable gender stereotyping in the media we examined. Virtually all of the media trivialized or marginalized female athletes and women’s sports, while celebrating male athletes and men’s sports. For example, regardless of the age of the athletes, women were habitually called “girls” or “young ladies,” whereas men were called “men” or “young men,” never “boys.” Female athletes were more likely to be described as failing, and these failures were attributed to some combination of nervousness, lack of confidence, lack of “being comfortable,” lack of aggression, and lack of stamina. Men were far less often framed as failing—according to the media, men appeared to miss shots and lose matches not so much because of their own individual shortcomings (nervousness or losing control) but because of the power, strength, and intelligence of their male opponents. On the evening news, female athletes were often ignored, but during the few segments when they did appear, they were presented in gag stories or as sex objects.

There were sharp quantitative differences too. Out of 6 weeks of televised sports news that we sampled, men received 92% of the air time, women’s sports received 5%, and gender-neutral topics, 3%.

Our published report was distributed to a wide range of sports organizations, including networks and journalists whose broadcasts and commentaries we studied. We were unprepared for the backlash that occurred. Journalists reacted with great defensiveness and disputed almost every one of our qualitative findings. We routinely heard our report trashed on radio programs or were invited to defend our point of view with shock jocks. What we saw as unmistakable evidence of sexism, the linguistic framing mentioned above or gag features such as nuns playing beach volleyball in their habits, many journalists argued were the very things that made sports entertaining. Here different perspectives issued from different interests. Mike and I wanted to see more equitable portrayals of female athletes, whereas the television commentators and producers wanted to maximize profits by getting more viewers to tune in. Ultimately, our study seemed to have an impact on the way commentators characterized female athletes, at least in terms of the language used to describe them. But even in the first decade of 2000, men still get by far the greater share of air time. In 2005, our most recent study, men received 91.4% of the air time, women received only 6.3%, and gender-neutral topics, 2.4%. Television producers and commentators continue to argue that they are just “giving the viewers what they want.” It is clear that economic interests trump the interests of equity.

My next illustration is an extreme example of interests in collision but also of separate and opposed sport cultures: the academic sport culture and the lay audience sport culture. Fifteen years ago a local columnist asked me to respond to a declaration of a local philanthropist. I want to remind you that I come from Milwaukee, and in our city the married couple Lloyd Pettit and Jane Bradley have been extremely generous in funding sports projects such as the Pettit National Ice Center and the Bradley Center, a multimillion dollar sports and entertainment complex. Lloyd Pettit, a former sports broadcaster and owner of the Milwaukee

Admirals, was regarded with great affection by many sports fans. After Bonnie Blair, the renowned speed skater, won one of her many gold medals in speed skating, Pettit remarked, “She’s not much of a looker, but she’s sure a scrapper.” When asked by the columnist to respond to this quote, I gave a fairly mild version of my stock answer about statements that focus on a sportswoman’s appearance. I pointed out that Pettit’s comments about Blair trivialized her considerable athletic accomplishments and reinforced the idea that a woman should be judged by the way she looks rather than the things at which she excels. Comments like these marginalize female athletes.

Two days later I received a letter from a Milwaukee man who described in precise and frightening anatomical detail what he would like to do to me for criticizing his hero, Lloyd Pettit. The letter was so abusive that I actually wound up turning it over to the campus police. One of our officers drove out to the home of the letter-writer and explained that he would be facing a jail sentence if he continued harassing me. In this example, my purely scholarly view clashed with an avid fan’s view—with unfortunate consequences.

My final example relates to the minor quibble I have with Jay’s article. Jay argued that low priority is given to physical culture as a research topic because of disciplinary constraints. I would argue just the opposite. In recent years many disciplines have appropriated body culture as their own: anthropology, history, philosophy, sociology, modern studies, and English, to name several. It seems that little attention is given to physical culture only when it is situated in a department of kinesiology or physical education. The following example illustrates this quite vividly.

At a university with faculty governance like mine, each department sees itself as its own fiefdom, and the larger umbrella—the school or college in which the department resides—introduces more distance yet from departments in other schools and colleges. These units just don’t talk to each other. In fact, at a state university like the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee where the legislature determines the spending on education, each campus, college, and department is competing with other campuses, colleges, and departments for a shrinking pool of resources. If a college or department other than my own receives big bucks from the chancellor, that reduces the resources for our college and our department accordingly. It is a zero-sum game. This fact of university life encourages an insular kind of thinking along the lines of: Our department (or college or campus) is most deserving of these resources. No other department (or college or campus) works as hard as we do. Not surprisingly, campuses, colleges, and departments other than one’s own are sometimes regarded as the enemy. It is little wonder that there is a failure to communicate.

In addition, we’re out to protect our intellectual territory. In my department, the Department of Human Movement Sciences in the College of Health Sciences, we teach a large variety of courses related to kinesiology. We focus on physical activity, sport, body culture, and body practices. We, therefore, see the terrain of sport and physical activity as most properly our own. As part of our curriculum, we offer three courses in the sociology of physical activity and sport. Our department includes two of us who are sport sociologists, and between us we have devoted a total of 45 years of focused research and teaching on sport sociology. Imagine our

dismay when another department, sociology, in a different college from our own, offers a course that is basically an introduction to sport sociology.

In fact, it is not at all unreasonable that someone in a sociology department would think that he or she has a right to teach sociology of sport. The point here is that there are different perspectives on a given disciplinary subject matter, which produce different *interests*.

The fellow who teaches this course seems to be completely unaware of the fact that there is a whole body of literature on sociology of sport based on contributions from people like me in departments like mine. He never attends annual sport sociology conferences or publishes in the area. He has no background in human movement sciences or kinesiology, nor does he seem to know or acknowledge that my department already offers a well-developed curriculum for students of sport sociology. It is also likely that he would be dismissive of our sport sociology courses because he probably believes that he has the corner on sociology. We both have the same mission, that is, to instruct students in sociology of sport, but we have never talked to each other about, for example, a team-taught class or any other cross-fertilization of our ideas or our respective disciplines. Crossing this disciplinary divide is unthinkable; we each have our turf to protect.

Throughout my response, I have used analogies to illustrate why conflicts arise when groups have different interests. So where does that leave us? Should we abandon attempts to bridge the culture gap? Are conflicts of interest inevitable between athletic departments and academic departments? As much as I would like to leave some hope for, in the jargon of business, a win-win solution, it seems that an easy solution is unlikely to occur. At base, academic departments and athletic departments have decidedly different missions. Academic departments have a mission to educate students and to contribute to a body of knowledge. Athletic departments have a mission to entertain and to prove their superiority over other colleges and teams. Neither mission is inherently flawed but neither are they necessarily compatible.