

Athletics IS Education: A Response to Kane, Leo, and Holleran's (2008) Case Study of University of Minnesota Student-Athletes

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Dr. Kane, Dr. Leo, and Ms. Holleran:

Thank you very much for an informative and instructive presentation on the academic status of athletes in your university (Kane, Leo, & Holleran 2008). You and your colleagues on the Task Force should be complimented on the successful completion of the mandate assigned to you. You have churned a large volume of data to provide an insightful set of recommendations for university administration to follow. I am sure that other universities will take these guidelines seriously and implement them.

Your data show that the athletes in your university do not lag behind the non-athletes in academic performance. For example, Figure 2 (Kane, Leo, Holleran, 2008, p. 107) shows that when entering the university, the academic credentials of athletes and nonathletes were almost the same. Nearly 85% of the athletes were in the top 50% in their respective high school classes.

Further, according to Figure 5 (Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008, p. 126), 69.2% of athletes graduated within 6 years whereas only 60.8% of nonathletes did so. As I understand, these impressive figures are comparable to those of many other universities. So athletes do better academically than nonathletes in the 6-year graduation rates. Of course, we must keep in mind that graduation rates include the minimally acceptable academic performances.

On a different note, Figure 3 (Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008, p. 108) shows that the percentage of at-risk students among athletes is almost twice as high as nonathletes: 27% versus 14.3%. It suggests that the admission standards are less stringent for student athletes. The university must verify whether this was the case and take corrective actions, if necessary. But we have to note that a significant 14.3% of the nonathletes were also at risk. So, the admissions bar was not lowered for athletes only. We must also understand that the athletes bring to the table something more than the general at-risk students do—their expertise in athletics,

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which is sponsored by the universities and valued by society in general. From this perspective, the higher percentage of at-risk athletes can be justified.

An impressive finding in your study is that the graduation rates of the at-risk athletes were better than those of at-risk nonathletes as shown in Figure 4 (Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008, p. 109). At the six-year mark, 56.6% of at-risk athletes had graduated while only 35% of the at-risk nonathletes had. This is a great achievement and your university, athletic department, academic support units, and the NCAA must be complimented for their efforts in bringing this about. What your university has achieved is consistent with Myles Brand's report that the graduation rates among athletes had considerably improved last year (Wieberg, 2008).

Another interesting finding relates to the overachieving athletes in your study. Although few in number, the process by which these students performed better than expected is worthy of further research. May I suggest a case-study approach to investigating factors that turned these at-risk students into overachievers? Such research would yield insight into creating similar environmental conditions to enhance the academic performance of all athletes.

Focusing on the underachievers, Recommendation 4 (Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008, p. 117) asks the university to "intensify efforts to track, engage, and provide opportunities for former student-athletes who have left the University of Minnesota without graduating." Though it is important to bring them back into the fold, it would also be worthwhile to study and understand the factors that contributed to their not graduating in the first place. Such an investigation might provide us some guidelines on removing the impediments that prevent athletes from graduating in time.

One of your recommendations is to offer courses that are relevant to student athletes' future careers. This is important because the sport industry offers many and varied career opportunities. A 1997 estimate reported that the sport industry and the sectors supported by the sport industry employed 4.65 million people with a household income of \$127 billion (Meeks, 1997). Universities can offer courses to facilitate our athletes finding preferred careers from among many offered by the vast sport industry.

You also make a great point about the summer bridge programs and how they help entering student-athletes adjust to the novelty, as well as the rigor of a university education. We might extend that approach and offer summer courses for all athletes. In fact, we could follow Goldhar (2008), who would like to see varsity athletes on a 12-month schedule, including summers, such that their academic load per term would be reduced. This would help them make up for the credits missed during the regular terms because of their involvement with athletics.

The basic premise of all efforts to reform intercollegiate athletics, including yours, is captured by the phrase "Athletics IN Education." That is, athletics is conceived of as an entity different from education. To prevent athletics from corrupting education, and to maintain the academic integrity of the university, athletics has to be controlled, regulated, and constrained. And we have done a good job of it. But an alternate and more meaningful paradigm would hold that "Athletics IS Education." Several scholars, including the eminent speakers at this colloquium (e.g., Coakley, 2008; Hyland, 2008; Simon, 2008; and Thelin, 2008) have advocated that sport be considered an educational venture.

For example, Simon (2004) argues that, in committing their minds and bodies to the pursuit of excellence, athletes analyze and understand their own strengths and

weaknesses and work hard to overcome weakness and improve their performance capabilities. In a contest, they analyze the play, use judgment and make decisions to react intelligently and skillfully to situations that arise, and exhibit perseverance and coolness under pressure. He notes that these same attributes and qualities are also necessary for success in the humanities and sciences. In his words,

an important part of education is learning to know and understand oneself, and that kind of self-knowledge is one of the most valuable kinds of knowledge that can emerge from participation in sport. In calling for the best that is within each participant, a good athletic program can provide educational experiences that are unusually intense and unusually valuable, and that reinforce and help develop many of the same traits and that promote learning elsewhere. (Simon, 2004, p. 160).

Simon also cites Paul Weiss in suggesting that athletics (and perhaps performing arts) is the only area “where students can achieve and demonstrate excellence—and not just as apprentice learners but in performances that rank among the best at a high level of comparative judgment” (p. 160). In his keynote address yesterday, Simon advanced the thesis of mutual reinforcement between athletics and academics (Simon, 2008).

More recently, Brand (2006), noting that the academy has undervalued the importance of intercollegiate athletics, has contrasted knowledge “that” (i.e., factual knowledge) and knowledge “how” (i.e., learning and applying skills). He argues that some of the academic programs such as music and other performing arts are more focused on knowledge “how” rather than on knowledge “that.” His frustration, and that of others like me, is that although the academy would endorse and promote music and such other programs as legitimate curricular programs, they treat athletics as extracurricular. While acknowledging Simon’s focus on athletes learning cognitive skills, Brand emphasizes that the learning in physical-skill development is itself a legitimate and worthy part of a university education.

From ancient Greek times through the German Turner movement and the English Public Schools, sport has been integrally linked to education (e.g., Rice, Hutchinson, & Lee, 1969; Van Dalen & Bennett, 1971). The notion of learning and practicing physical skills has traditionally been accepted as a worthy educational pursuit in American universities as well. Most universities have degree programs in physical education wherein teaching and learning physical skills take central stage. Similarly, many universities offer credit courses in skill development in sports and physical activity for students from across the campus. When students pursue excellence in the same activities, however, the process and effort are considered extracurricular. Consider this somewhat ludicrous position: You can get credit for mediocre performance in sport but not for excellent performance in sport.

Recommendation 5 of your presentation (Kane, Leo, & Holleran, 2008, p. 120) calls for the integration of intercollegiate athletics with the broader university community. In this regard, you have identified several steps including (a) membership of coaches and other athletics staff in university-wide committees, (b) coaches attendance in forums or at meetings in which the status of student-athletes is discussed, (c) opportunities for recruits to meet with faculty, (d) broadening the Guest Coach program; and (e) student-athletes inviting faculty members to the annual student-athlete Scholars Banquet. These are excellent ideas that will go a

long way in the integration of athletics and education. From a broader perspective, Brand (2006) also calls for the integrated view in which athletic programs are made part of the educational mission of the university and the harmony and the unity of body and mind will be part of a sound education. He calls for the “mainstreaming” of athletics into the mission, structure, and processes of the university.

I humbly submit that a School or College of Sports would be a proper setting for mainstreaming athletics into the educational venture. The College of Sports would be comprised of three differentiated units: the academic unit involved in teaching and studying sport, and the two units practicing sport—the department of athletics and the department of campus recreation. The academic unit might include the disciplinary fields of exercise physiology, biochemistry, biomechanics, sport psychology, sport sociology, sport history, sport philosophy, and the professional programs of physical education, coach education, athletic therapy, sport management, athletic administration, and recreation administration.

The essential feature of the College of Sports would be that the three units would be sufficiently and meaningfully differentiated. Differentiation refers to the division of labor based on differing environmental conditions (Chelladurai, 2005; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). Because each unit is required to interact with different segments of the environment (and these segments differ in terms of certainty, feedback, and rate of change), each organizational unit must be organized differently to enable it to cope with the particular subenvironment and its requirements. A further necessary condition for differentiation is that the members of a unit possess those specific talents and aptitudes that match the demands of the environment. We have been very successful in differentiating the three units dealing with sport: (a) the athletic department, which fosters pursuit of excellence; (b) the recreation department, which offers facilities and services to promote participation in physical activity; and (c) the academic unit, which provides for the teaching of sports and research in the sport domain. Up until now these units have been successfully operating independent of each other.

Integration refers to the process by which the differentiated units are brought together to cooperate with each other in the pursuit of organizational goals. A fundamental tenet of integration is that the individuality and independence of the differentiated units will not be violated through the efforts to integrate. Therefore, in the proposed College of Sports, the three units under consideration will be left to operate as they are, subject to changes that result from contingencies in their respective environments. At the moment, the integration of these units in large universities has been restricted to sharing their facilities and services. If there is to be true integration in the pursuit of educational goals, and if there is to be “mainstreaming” of athletics with academics, there needs to be more than sharing of facilities and services. Although the suggestions made in the Minnesota report are important and necessary, there is an even more substantive integrative mechanism that would truly bring the practicing units (athletics and recreation) into the educational orbit. Such integration would focus more on the overlaps in the tasks performed by the three units, that is, teaching, coaching, and research.

This perspective is illustrated in Figure 1 in which the three differentiated units at one level are shown to be independent of each other and interacting with their respective environments. At another level they are brought together and integrated to promote the teaching of sports-related subjects, coaching of sports teams, and

research on topics related to sport and physical activity. The leaders in athletics and recreation can be enlisted to teach those courses dealing with areas in which they possess the expertise and practical experience. The researchers, in turn, can assist the other two units in investigating those issues that are most pertinent to those units. In doing so, the researchers can co-opt the coaches and managers in the practicing units for action research or field research to improve their strategies and practices. Such efforts would first create conditions in which the scholars and practitioners would begin to understand and appreciate each other in terms of their respective expertise and experiences and in relation to problems they face in carrying out their assignments. Equally important is the opportunity for each to learn from the other such that each becomes more proficient in their respective jobs. Such an amalgamation of varied expertise and experience would be conducive to the development of a program of courses that would help the athletes secure their careers in the sport industry.

There are two critical conditions for the successful operation of the College of Sports: (a) institutional support and (b) understanding and acceptance among the units to be integrated. The first obvious step by the Institution is the establishment of the College of Sports. But more importantly, true task integration of the three units would be facilitated by incentives for collaborative efforts by the units and members therein. For instance, research carried out for the betterment of the other two units could be given added weight in assessing the performance of the researchers. By the same token, the coaches and administrators could be recognized

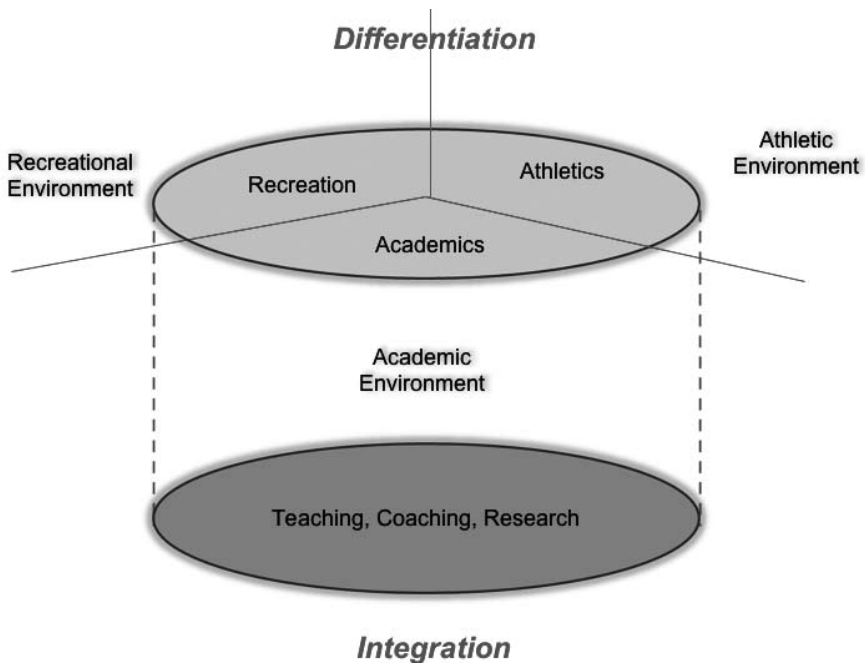


Figure 1 — The design of the proposed college of sports.

for their contribution to action and/or field research. As for teaching, contracts with coaches could include a clause requiring the coach be involved in teaching academic courses. Incentives might also be offered to coaches if they were to take courses to improve their teaching, as well as their coaching.

The second condition for the success of the college falls on the members of the three units. Each member will have to realize that members of the other units are legitimate experts in their respective roles. In spite of the differences in educational background, each has risen to their position based on his or her expertise. This recognition and mutual respect would be absolutely necessary for the College of Sports to be efficient and effective. Coakley (2008) made a strong plea to close the gap between the conflicting cultures of academia and athletic departments so that faculty can make informed decisions related to intercollegiate sports. The proposed format of a College of Sports might be a useful strategy in closing the culture gap and initiating a culture of cooperation and collaboration.

The schools and colleges of medicine in many universities are good examples of highly differentiated units integrated into one larger unit for the furtherance of their respective objectives toward a common goal. Various disciplines of medical practice such as anesthesiology, family medicine, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics, psychiatry, and surgery are housed in and administered by a central unit called the medical center. By the same token, disparate academic fields such as athletic training, dietetics, occupational therapy, and radiologic sciences are brought together as an academic unit, the college of medicine. Both the medical center and the college of medicine are integrally linked into one larger unit. We could follow this medical model in designing and structuring the College of Sports.

By the way, the proposed organizational form (i.e., the College of Sports) is not new. There was a time when all three units—academics, athletics, and intramurals—were housed in one department. For instance, the famous Buckeye football coach, Woody Hayes, was a member of the school of physical education and taught PE classes. It was from there that he began his illustrious coaching career. Even today we have similar structures in some universities, more notably in Canada. If I understand history correctly, the split between academic and practicing units of sport had more to do with the territorial imperatives and power dynamics than with any imagined or real differences in what was taught or practiced. In my view, the root cause for this state of affairs was the failure to differentiate the units properly and integrate them effectively. All I am suggesting here is that if universities are concerned about integrating the athletic department within the academic stream of the university, here is one possible and meaningful way of doing it. Of course, altering the current mind-set of both academics and practitioners is not going to be easy, but the final outcome may prove to be beneficial to all parties.

On a different note, the discussants yesterday noted that the commercialization of sport has eroded the educational value of sport. We should not be too hard on the process of commercialization. The university itself is a commercial enterprise. It produces various educational services and exchanges those services with relevant clients and customers. And of course the prices for the products vary with the presumed quality of the services. Thus, Harvard University charges higher student fees than the University of Dayton. Within a single university, the Colleges of Medicine and Business set higher fees than, say, the College of Education. These are acceptable practices and often praised.

On a more general level, *pure* commerce in a *free* market is the bedrock of our capitalistic ideology, and it is a democratic process. What would corrupt both commerce and sport is when the product we exchange is tainted in some way and the market dynamics is restricted by some means. The product we exchange in the context of football, for example, is entertainment in the form of excellence exhibited in a fair contest. Excellence can be tainted if it is enhanced artificially through what Holowchak (2002) calls pharmacological ergogenic aids (i.e., drugs and hormones). The contest itself can be tainted if the match is fixed or attempts are made to take unfair advantage of the visiting teams. Administrators and coaches, as educators, need to ensure that the product we offer is genuine. Otherwise, our efforts would amount to consumer fraud.

Pure commerce also implies that those who produce the excellence are treated well. In the context of intercollegiate sport, the athletes are the primary producers of the excellence that is paraded as entertainment. Financial remuneration to players is not the issue here. It is the abusive treatment of the players during practices and games that would detract from pure commerce. Examples of abusive practices would be if an athlete is made to practice or compete before an injury is completely healed, or if the athletes are subjected to unduly long hours of practice.

We, the Buckeyes, pat ourselves on our backs because our athletic program is a \$110 million operation. Our football program makes nearly \$10 million per game. The extraordinary surplus created by our football program is then used to support more than 34 other collegiate teams pursuing excellence in different nonrevenue sports. These sports cost money, and our football program supplies that money. This is a glorious and legitimate example of commercialization in intercollegiate athletics. I need not point out how successful the NCAA is in commercializing the popularity of intercollegiate football and basketball, as well as distributing the surpluses to member institutions. In the final analysis, commercialization of sport is not a bad thing in itself.

Reverting back to the notion of Athletics Is Education, if we accept and make the shift in paradigms from Athletics IN Education to Athletics IS Education, what would be the processes and practices that would be different? Let me outline some of the practices that will be consistent with the ideology that holds that pursuit of excellence in sport is an educational enterprise.

Obviously, we will discard the catch phrase “Athletics IN Education” and replace it with “Athletics IS Education.” We will also discard the term “student-athlete” and refer to them as simply students. If we do not have student-musicians why should we have student-athletes?

Athletes will not be treated any differently than nonathletes. We should refrain from imposing higher standards of behavior and performance in academics just because one is pursuing excellence in sports. Accordingly, the admission requirements will be nothing less and nothing more for athletes than for nonathletes in each university. Similarly, eligibility and graduation requirements in terms of required courses and GPA would be the same for athletes and nonathletes in each university. In other words, we would not pressure athletes to maintain a higher academic profile just because they are excellent in sports. Nor would we impose a uniform set of standards for all athletes in every university. In other words, each university will set the same standards for its athletes and nonathletes.

In addition, an athlete would be allowed to set the pace of his or her academic progress in relation to athletic pursuits. If 20% of the general student population takes more than 6 years to graduate, why would we not allow an athlete to take his or her time to complete a degree program? We must bear in mind that one could pursue excellence in sport only when one is young, whereas one could get a Ph.D. in his or her fifties.

More than 40 years ago, Keating (1964) noted that no other enterprise either within the university or elsewhere can compare with intercollegiate athletics in terms of clarity of goals, choice of rational activities to achieve those goals, the staffing of appropriate personnel to carry out the assigned tasks, an objective system of evaluating personnel and programs, and equitable rewards for performances. This is not to deny that individual departments and/or units therein would have failed miserably, but overall, intercollegiate athletics is an epitome of an efficient and effective organization.

We have, however, introduced inefficiencies into the system by requiring athletic departments to ensure the performance of the athletes in other academic subjects. From my perspective, it is blatantly unfair that athletic departments would be burdened with ensuring the education of the athletes in other academic subjects. We do not ask the School of Music to ensure the performance of its students in mathematics or psychology. Then why would we hold the athletic department responsible for an athlete's performance in English? A student's progress in the other academic areas is the responsibility of the larger university with its multibillion-dollar resources. That would leave the athletic department to do what it is most qualified for and where it has been most successful: the pursuit of excellence in sports.

Another issue is that of how much academic credit should be given to the learning of both cognitive and psychomotor skills that occur during practices and contests in the athletic context. We need to investigate practices in academic units dealing with performing arts and modify them to suit our (athletics) purposes.

If we undertake this paradigmatic shift, what would be the role of the NCAA? It is the National Collegiate Athletic Association and not the National Collegiate Academic Association. So let the NCAA be concerned with only athletic endeavors. Its major responsibility would be to promote the pursuit of excellence in all member institutions. As O'Rourke and Chelladurai (2006) noted, as the apex of the interorganizational network, the NCAA's functions would be largely to:

1. create greater access to resources for member institutions,
2. increase the financial performance of members,
3. facilitate innovation and sharing of knowledge and learning among member institutions,
4. reduce variety and uncertainty in transactions and economic uncertainty,
5. economize the costs of information gathering and dissemination, and
6. coordinate interdependent activities among member institutions.

In summary, assuming a shift in the paradigm to Athletics Is Education, I have suggested a few areas in which significant changes need to occur. These ideas and other relevant issues including the role of the NCAA in the new paradigm need to be debated seriously and researched rigorously. If the shift occurs, it would entail

many more substantive changes than what I have suggested. We know that changes are easy to contemplate but very hard to execute. A successful change to the new paradigm would require a strong belief and conviction among the stakeholders that (a) the paradigm shift is desirable, appropriate, and worthy of our efforts; (b) academic faculty and the sport administrators are capable of making the necessary changes; and (c) all sections and the members in them would benefit greatly from the new venture. Equally significant is the commitment of the larger university to the new paradigm in terms of monitoring and supporting the new enterprise. It must be recognized, as well, that the transition period might be chaotic and trying at times, perhaps because members on all sides are wedded to previous beliefs and practices. It would be necessary for those in charge to unlearn previous convictions and habits and embrace new opportunities and challenges.

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