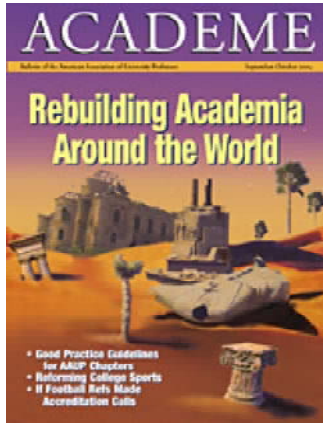


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The Faculty's Role in Reforming College Sports

The commercialization of intercollegiate athletics threatens academic values. Working together, professors forge a new model of the academics-athletics connection..

By James W. Earl

Last fall, I addressed the AAUP's 2003 governance conference about a faculty-led initiative to reform college sports. The Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA) grew out of a meeting one afternoon in the student union at the University of Oregon among a few senior professors who had recently been appointed to the faculty senate. Those who get involved in faculty governance, on my campus and on virtually every other U.S. campus, quickly become bothered by athletics. It dawns on them that the firewall between academics and athletics is thin; in fact, it can barely hide an awful contradiction in the university they love.

That afternoon, we hatched a simple plan to contact the senate presidents at the other nine universities in the Pacific-10 athletics conference to see if they shared our concerns. Perhaps the ten senates could act together to urge our presidents to discuss the issues. We were naïve, but the plan turned out to be much better than we could have imagined. It gave rise to a grassroots movement among faculty leaders across the country.

The COIA's immediate goal is to have faculty senates from coast to coast agree on achievable, enforceable, and meaningful reforms, starting with the academic standards and governance practices most clearly within the purview of the faculty. Unlike earlier faculty movements, ours relies on well-established faculty governance procedures, so that our efforts can take official form through faculty action.

My Story

I wasn't hired by the University of Oregon to worry about intercollegiate athletics, and I am sure that those who appointed me wish I'd never gotten into it. I was hired to worry about the Old English language between the seventh and eleventh centuries, and *Beowulf*, the epic poem written in it. I also teach other ancient and medieval

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literatures, and, in my spare time, I study ancient languages, translate an epic poem of Provence, chip away at a study of Indian literature, and run adult seminars in the humanities for the community. This is my profession. And as every professor knows, in addition to all these things, I advise students, direct dissertations, and serve on numerous committees and, occasionally, the university senate.

Is it beside the point to talk about my professorial occupations here? I think not, because when I talk about college sports, I talk as a professor. In this magazine, obviously, or at an AAUP conference, I don't have to defend the faculty's role at the university. But in my dealings with those involved in athletics, I have to defend it every day. I have to explain what I do and how it embodies the university's mission, over and over again, to everyone, from the fans in the stands right on up to the trustees and the president.

Only the faculty seems to understand that professors are real stakeholders in the university, living as we do, totally immersed in it and devoted to its traditional mission. No one can stake a more genuine claim to the university than the faculty. What we do at the university isn't some sideshow; we are the main event.

One of the witty things that sports fans say to me is, Don't you wish you could pack 60,000 people into the stands for a lecture on *Beowulf*? This tiresome question is supposed to remind me that more people care about what happens at the stadium than in my classroom, that classrooms are in fact boring, that literature isn't nearly as exciting or as popular as football. So, who am I to be criticizing athletics? Obviously, I'm just envious.

My answer is no, I'm not motivated by envy. The parents of America aren't shelling out \$10,000, \$20,000, or \$30,000 a year to send their kids to watch football games, I remind them, but to get an education. There are tens of millions of parents out there refinancing the house and going into lifelong debt because they consider the classroom experience that I provide just that valuable. I have no doubts about the value of what I do.

For all of our concern about athletics, it is still just a sliver of the total university budget (about 4 percent). It's an auxiliary. Even if it sometimes seems as if the tail's wagging the dog, nobody could think that athletics is the dog, and education the tail. We are the university. We are the chief guardians of what makes it valuable, what makes it worth the high price parents pay. As former Harvard University president Derek Bok says in his 2003 book, *Universities in the Marketplace*:

Of all the major constituencies in a university, faculty members are in the best position to appreciate academic values and insist on their observance. Since they work on campus, they are better suited than trustees to observe what is going on. They have the most experience with academic programs and how they work. Most of all, they have the greatest stake in preserving proper academic standards and principles, since these values protect the integrity of their work and help perpetuate its quality.

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Yet it's becoming increasingly clear that if we don't continue to set the standards, someone else will—or something else, by which I mean money and the marketplace—and those standards won't be ones we'll want to defend. To some people, the university is a business; to others, it's a state agency; to others, it's an engine for the economy; and for others—many, many others—it's little more than a great team, like the dazzling Ducks. And the university is all these things; but for you and me—for the faculty—the university is obviously something else and something more: it's academic freedom; it's the arts and sciences; it's the library, the all-nighter, the seminar table; it's liberal education, pure research, the sharing of ideas, the love of books, and the Socratic method; it's young people on a steep learning curve; it's Phi Beta Kappa and lifelong learning; and also, to be honest, it's the absent-minded professor—Einstein with his bad hair, Einstein who can't remember his phone number. That's okay with me.

So how did this absent-minded professor get involved with athletics? It's a question I ask myself every day. For the first thirty years of my academic career, I had no occasion and no reason to worry about sports. I followed the Cavaliers, then the Rams, then the Ducks, all from the unluxurious skybox of my ivory tower. Until a few years ago, even the amazing Ducks had no connection to my life as a professor.

It's as if a firewall separated the slightly disheveled intellectual enterprise the professor inhabits and the glamorous athletic one thriving across campus. I carried out my academic career at three schools, hardly aware that athletics was there at all. Maybe I should have been alarmed all along by the total disconnect.

Why am I worried about athletics now? Is it because the role of athletics on campus has changed, so I can't ignore it any more? A breach in the old firewall? Probably not: many of my colleagues remain sublimely uninterested in sports, happily concentrated on their work. Many of them wonder why I'm so interested. I don't bother them with it. I envy their focus on their research and teaching, and I've become resigned to being, for the time being, their firewall.

That's one of the functions of faculty leadership; a few of us at a time take our turns in the senate, or on the athletics committee, precisely so the rest of us don't have to worry about it. By and large, I've learned, the faculty don't really want to be bothered about athletics—even those who enjoy sports, and even those who know there's a real problem.

My involvement began when I became senate president four years ago. Shortly afterward, the athletics department announced a \$90 million expansion of our stadium. I first learned about it from the local paper over breakfast one morning. Oddly, in the same issue, I also read about the latest round of cuts to the university's budget by the state legislature. I saw several things at once: a looming crisis in our academic budget; a second crisis in the relationship between academics and athletics, which suddenly looked ironic, if not comically inappropriate; and a third crisis in faculty governance—for I could barely believe that the university could launch such a huge and expensive project without even informing the faculty.

Only a few weeks later, I read another story in the morning paper, which reported that our university's annual "civil war" game against

Oregon State had been rescheduled for the Saturday before finals week at the request of network television. I wasn't the only faculty member to learn about this de-velopment from the newspaper; not even the provost had been consulted. His precious "dead week," with its elaborate rules forbidding distractions, was now the biggest party weekend of the year.

The Coalition

When we carried out the plan we devised that afternoon in the student union to contact the senate presidents at the other Pac-10 schools, we discovered that although the Pac-10 teams are tough competitors, and the presidents of Pac-10 institutions also see their schools as competing in the academic marketplace, the faculties mostly don't feel this competition. Our allegiance to our professional ideals is almost always stronger than our allegiance to our individual institutions when those two loyalties come into conflict.

We belong to a profession with a shared mission and shared ideals, no matter where we work. If you encourage faculties—at least faculty leaders—to talk to each other, they see the issues surrounding athletics and academics the same way, and they're more eager to cooperate than compete.

So the Pac-10 faculties cooperated, and in spring 2000, nine of them passed resolutions endorsing the "academics first" movement initiated by former Indiana University president Myles Brand, now president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The movement urges presidents, in Brand's words, to "turn down the volume" of intercollegiate athletics. Faculty leaders in other national athletics conferences read about our campaign, and the following year they, too, began cooperating to urge athletics reform on their presidents.

It was Bob Eno, senate president at Indiana University, who brought the local conference movements together under one umbrella in the COIA. No one had to be asked twice. The coalition quickly found support from faculty leaders in NCAA Division I-A schools across the country. Its steering committee, representing all six Bowl Championship Series conferences, forged a document titled Framework for Comprehensive Athletics Reform, which is now being adopted by faculty senates in every national college athletics conference. Thirty-seven faculty senates have formally adopted the framework at this point, and another twenty-one are in the process of doing so.

The framework lays out the chief directions for reform in the areas of academic integrity, athlete welfare, governance, finances, and commercialization. Its language is flexible enough to allow for debate and local difference without weakening the drive for a national consensus.

Faculty senate presidents, if I may say so myself, tend to be a responsible lot of leadership types, not firebrands, malcontents, or radicals. Every campus has professors who hate sports and who want to see them slashed or eliminated, but the coalition, following Brand's lead, adopted from the start a moderate long-term reform agenda. We were buoyed by Brand's selection as NCAA president in 2002, and we're eager to see reform take place under NCAA leadership if possible. We also admire the frank reports of the Knight Commission on

Intercollegiate Athletics.

Our immediate goal, as I have pointed out, is to have faculty senates from coast to coast agree on clear, practicable, and meaningful reform of intercollegiate athletics. Our ultimate goal is to help all stakeholders in college sports bring about comprehensive reform of the entire industry, for the sake of both college athletics and the university system. We are developing best-practices documents to help guide universities through the nuts-and-bolts practicalities of reform.

Our long-range goals lie outside the purview of the faculty. They require alliances with college and university presidents and governing boards. These goals include adjusting the length of seasons and the size of teams, cutting costs, recommitting college sports to amateurism, particularly in revenue sports, and reducing the dependence of sports programs on commercial contracts. Our ambitions are confined to Division I-A, but we encourage colleagues in other divisions to consider formulating and evaluating the issues that pertain to their athletics programs, and to initiate a similar process of faculty engagement.

Obstacles

It's widely felt that the moment is propitious. If reform misfires now, we may have missed our best opportunity to accomplish it. We also know that the immediate future is likely to present obstacles that will slow the pace of reform and tempt us to say that we've gotten as far as we can get, well before meaningful reform can be achieved. Bob Eno compiled a list of the obstacles we can expect:

1. The NCAA has approved a package of initial academic reforms. These first steps may take the steam out of reform by appearing to be an adequate result. But they will not eliminate the tremendous financial incentives that undermine reform.
2. The process of approval by faculty senates of the coalition's framework will be slow and will only partly succeed. That's in keeping with the nature of faculty senates and the unusual nature of what we're trying to accomplish. So we'll have to persist in our reform efforts.
3. Some aspects of reform are truly difficult—workable solutions haven't yet been envisioned. The most obvious problems are in the area of cost reduction, where athletics conferences and the NCAA encounter antitrust strictures that make agreements to restrain costs difficult to design and sustain. And presidents—the only people who can attack these issues—have many other priorities. Inducing them to work together to arrive at practicable solutions will also require persistence. The path of least resistance will always be to answer funding needs by negotiating ever-more-lucrative commercial contracts. Faculty will have to create and maintain a national network to monitor movement, or the lack of it, and to hold presidents and boards accountable for their efforts.
4. We are only beginning the faculty reform movement. We've made progress, but the momentum against us is keeping pace. There are the destabilizing forces of conference realignment and legal infighting for economic advantages; congressional scrutiny inspired by the messy battle over access to championship bowls and dollars; and what seems

an unprecedented series of scandals in the player and coaching ranks. Insofar as the acceleration of these phenomena creates additional pressure for reform, it opens up positive opportunities. But unless we respond quickly, universities could lose substantial public credibility, and forces beyond our control will take away some of the options available to us.

Faculty, presidents, trustees, and others need to reach an understanding about the timetable for developing a comprehensive reform plan and stick to it—two years from now seems long enough. Of course, implementing the plan may take as much as a decade. But this year and next year need to be a time of intense, cooperative effort to reach long-term solutions to complex problems.

5. Faculty need to be both impatient and realistic. It is not hard to imagine solutions to athletics issues that conform to widely held faculty values, but that violate antitrust laws, have strong negative unintended consequences on athletes, or unnecessarily raise vocal public (and thus political) opposition. To be true partners in this endeavor, faculty can't voice simplistic solutions based on impressions rather than good data. Faculty leaders must become well educated on the issues and pragmatic in their thinking.

The goal is concrete—to achieve a new model for athletics that can persist over time in spite of real-world pressures. That means working toward a model that is not only practicable but achievable. Designing such a model is an intellectual challenge; implementing it is a political challenge, and we must discipline ourselves to contribute to it.

I have two more obstacles to add to Eno's list. First, the millions of avid college sports fans who crowd the stadiums or watch on television have little reason to believe us when we say that college sports is not as healthy as it looks. After all, the games have never been better: beautiful facilities, great coaching and playing, amazing television coverage and analysis. From the fan's point of view, bigger is better, and there's no such thing as too much.

The fans, of course, can't be expected to consider the situation from the owners' point of view—the owners in this case being institutions of higher learning, mostly public ones, and almost all in deep financial trouble. Most fans would be surprised to learn that these tremendously popular spectacles make no money for their owners, and in fact cost most universities precious millions they can't afford. How could fans know about the danger posed by athletics budgets that rise at twice the rate of academic budgets? If they did understand, perhaps they'd worry that what they were watching was really the college sports bubble, not unlike the dot.com bubble or the Enron bubble. Rapid growth often spells disaster. The fans probably wouldn't worry anyway. It's not in the nature of fanhood. So it's up to the owners—us—to slow things down before the bubble bursts.

But the fans are not going to understand why, and they're going to scream bloody murder if they think professors are interfering in their fun.

And finally, there is the constant temptation for those of us who get into this movement just to throw in the towel. Derek Bok writes

perceptively and eloquently about the problem of athletics and comes to the "melancholy conclusion" that "it may already be too late to turn back." After reading his book, William Bowen and James Shulman's *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values*, and James Duderstadt's *Intercollegiate Athletics and the American University* in quick succession, I felt a terrible heaviness come over me. What will it take for faculty to sustain a long-term commitment when the forces working against reform are so great and when some of the best spokespeople for reform consider it impossible?

Culture of Excess

I've described the coalition's reform agenda as a moderate and realistic one, and I myself try to walk the middle path. But let me confess, my personal feelings do fluctuate between extremes. Sometimes you hear the crowd roar, you root for the team, your students are on the field, you see how much the whole city enjoys the games and how the local economy is thriving because of them. You ask, Why can't I just join the crowd and go with the flow? Why complain and make them all so mad at me? Why should I feel responsible for reforming this giant? And please, let the Ducks win on Saturday!

But then there's another part of me that sometimes takes over, which is simply outraged about the situation of American higher education in relationship to athletics. I'm lucky: the University of Oregon has a relatively clean, self-supporting, well-managed, and pretty successful, sometimes even inspiring, athletics program, and an enlightened administration. But still, the faculty leadership at the university is at this moment absolutely and totally furious about athletics. Nike wants to build us a new \$200 million basketball arena. I suppose we should be grateful, but the fact is that we don't need or want it, and all the procedures of shared governance are being bypassed to make it happen.

Oregon is becoming a test case, an extreme example, a cartoon of what's going wrong in higher education today, with this spectacle of arms race mentality and commercialization. Many of you have local issues like ours. Oregon isn't so special, and I don't really want to be angry; I'd rather be moderate, thoughtful, and persuasive.

But I'll probably never have another opportunity as good as this one to make my case. Oh, for the tongues of angels. Oh, for that rhetorical silver bullet that might convince not only the choir, but even the most diehard, single-minded, anti-intellectual booster who loves sports but hates universities on principle, that despite all the ratings, the crowds, the excitement, the beauty of the game, and the glory of young athletes in their prime—not to mention the billions of dollars pouring through the sports-entertainment industry—college sports is not in good health. Health depends on moderation, and intercollegiate athletics, at least at Oregon, is nothing now if it's not a culture of wretched excess.

It was inevitable, I knew it, that the longer I went on, the sadder I would become over what has happened to college sports and what has happened to our universities during my thirty-three years as a professor. So I'll stop. I'll end with a quotation from Bob Eno, who seems always to see the silver lining:

Already, in Division I-A, faculty leaders and presidents are working

together more closely than before because of a convergence of effort on athletics. The potential benefit to higher education of such enhanced communication and cooperation among faculty, governing boards, and administrations is enormous, and our response to the endemic problems of intercollegiate sports might just be the groundwork upon which a new understanding of shared governance is built.

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