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Top Grades, Without the Classes

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The House Ways and Means Committee sent shock waves through college sports when it asked the National Collegiate Athletic Association to justify its federal tax exemption by explaining how cash-consuming, win-at-all-cost athletics departments serve educational purposes.

The short answer is that they don't. Indeed, they often undermine the mission of higher education by recruiting athletes who aren't prepared, then encouraging grade-padding and preferential treatment to keep them eligible for sports.

That process has been on vivid display at Auburn University, which is embroiled in a scandal involving athletes who are said to have padded their grades and remained eligible to play by taking courses that required no attendance and little if any work. This summer, James Gundlach, an Auburn sociology professor, laid out the problem in startling detail, telling reporters that corruption at the university was pervasive.

An internal audit by the university, made public this month, has uncovered a new round of problems. It found that a grade for a scholarship athlete had been changed -- from an incomplete to an A -- without the professor's knowledge. This conveniently raised the athlete's grade point average in the final semester just above the minimum required for graduation. In addition, the athlete received three other A's from so-called "directed reading" courses that required no classroom attendance. The professor who issued the initial incomplete in 2003 -- and only recently learned it had been changed -- suggested that someone in the university had guided the athlete through the scheduling process.

Auburn's administration promised swift and decisive action to address the problem. But it has also taken pains to point out that the suspect courses were open not just to athletes, but to all students.

That's no reason to feel relieved. The deeper and more alarming lesson is that the unethical behavior often associated with big-time college sports doesn't always end with athletes. It can easily seep outward, undermining academic standards and corrupting behavior in the university as a whole.

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 - Curiosity
 - Media glamorization
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