

College Athletics and Corruption

a CLIPS GUEST COMMENTARY

Ed.- Our guest author unambiguously states his perception of systemic corruption in college athletics. However, while some see corruption, others see “taking care of business.”

by Frank G. Splitt

Corruption? We have laws against it precisely so we can get away with it. Corruption is our protection. Corruption keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are prancing around in here instead of fighting for scraps of meat in the street. Corruption is why we win.
— *Tim Blake Nelson (playing Danny Dalton) in Syriana, screenplay by Stephen Gaghan*

SYSTEMIC CORRUPTION – The corruption in big-time college athletics is systemic—exhibiting most, if not all, of corruption’s many forms.¹ Not only have college athletics departed from the original amateur concept,² but they also see the inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means³ as well as the impairment of academic integrity. There are many examples of the latter the most recent of which come from Auburn University and the University of Michigan.⁴

Corruption is driven by big money and is enabled by cozy relationships that have been cultivated over the years by the NCAA and its member institutions with people and organizations that would normally have been expected to reign in corruption and the out-of-control commercialization of college athletics. The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, the print and TV media, and members of federal state governments, stand at the top of the list of those long on reform talk but short on decisive action.

AN OFT REPEATED FICTION – A recent column in the *Wall Street Journal* addressed the NCAA's efforts to sanction colleges whose teams fail to meet minimum academic standards.⁵ It prompted a letter response⁶ arguing that national championship programs can be built with legitimate graduation rates close to 100%—an oft repeated fiction. It's what Jon Ericson, a former provost at Drake University, calls the big-lie.⁷

The gist of this fiction is captured in an old riddle that goes something like this: "I have two coins that total 15 cents and one of them is not a nickel". The answer of course is that the other one is a nickel. It's a perfect example of telling a limited amount of truth with the intent to deceive and the effect is a lie. In big-time college athletics it's an art form mastered by the NCAA and the presidents of its member institutions.

It is perhaps coincidental that my related letter⁸ was published in the same issue of *The Wall Street Journal* as a commentary by Naomi Schaefer Riley on her interview of Notre Dame President, Fr. John Jenkins.⁹ The irony of the situation is evident from a reading this excerpt from Riley's commentary and excerpts from my letter that follow in the next section:

Football is a symbol, says Father Jenkins, who dismisses last year's problems as the vicissitudes of winning and losing. The fact that we graduate 99% of our players who stay around for four years – people see that and they think 'Oh, they do it the right way.'

CHEATING WORKS – What most people writing and speaking on the graduation and academic performance rates of college athletes fail to say is that in an era when the demand for blue-chip athletes with the qualifications for college-level academics far exceeds availability, schools resort to academic corruption—in other words, cheating.

Cheating enables schools to not only recruit and keep academically disadvantaged athletes eligible to work full time at their jobs as professional athletic entertainers, but also provide the illusion that these athletes are not only amateurs but bona fide students as well.

One must ask: Just where and how do athletes spend time on academics? With the present absence of transparency, accountability, and independent oversight, no one will ever know for sure. Unfortunately, it is likely that most college athletes participate in an alternative educational experience that is not part of their school's serious academic life, but rather a customized pseudo-academic experience engineered by academic support center staff members who work at the behest of the school's athletic department—graduating with diploma-mill-type degrees in general studies and the like.

Folks who should know better simply "look the other way," are taken in by NCAA spin, simply go along to get along, or, salve their consciences with the rationalization that a degree from their school—with its door-opening potential—makes up for a second-rate education. It has been my long-held hope that big-time Catholic Colleges would lead the way toward truth telling.¹⁰

The NCAA and its member institutions invest heavily in PR aimed at perpetuating the myth that their graduating athletes were real students. NCAA attorneys and lobbyists work to ensure that the big lie is taken for the truth by the courts and the U. S. Congress.

PATHETIC GRADUATION RATES – In a recent column,¹¹ Dan Wetzel writes: "Down in Florida, Dr. Richard Lapchick rails against the pathetic graduation rates for players who compete in the NCAA tournament – barely more than 50 percent for African Americans, according to his latest study. It's far worse when you consider the players on just the good teams."

It's even worse yet when you consider the fact that the data used by Lapchick comes from the NCAA which gets its data from schools that are highly motivated to cheat.¹²

HYPOCRISY AND GREED CONTINUE TO PAY OFF – Hypocrisy and greed know no bounds in college athletics; it’s a modern-day form of legalized corruption. As Robert Maynard Hutchins, the fifth president of the University of Chicago, said “everyone cheats.” Perhaps greed will always outweigh true wisdom in the higher echelons of colleges and universities supporting big-time football and men’s’ basketball programs.

So the cash registers at the NCAA and its member institutions will continue ringing up ill-gotten gains and college athletics will continue to preempt academics so long as the federal government continues to look the other way—avoiding a follow-up on the investigative work of the 109th Congress by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley and House Committee on Ways & Means Chairman Bill Thomas.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE – Senator Grassley, Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Finance Committee, has recently hired Theresa Pattara to replace Dean Zerbe, Grassley’s highly regarded senior counsel who spearheaded the scrutiny of nonprofit organizations. Pattara is a former IRS official with a reputation as a tough investigator. The move is a likely signal that Grassley’s scrutiny of nonprofit organizations will continue.

We of The Drake Group will continue to support Senator Grassley’s look into the justification for the NCAA’s tax-exempt status with our aim of making the continuation of the not-for-profit status of the NCAA and its member institutions contingent on the provision of a meaningful level of transparency, accountability, and oversight—including the disclosure of data on the academic performance of big-time college athletes.¹³

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Ed.-The opinions, intimations, conclusions and inferences contained within this commentary are solely those of the author; they do not reflect the opinions or endorsement of College Athletics Clips.

*We would also like to remind our readers that we constantly strive to make College Athletics Clips a **bi**-partisan e-publication (that is, one that articulates both sides of an issue). **Bi**-partisan is quite different from **non**-partisan, in which **neither** side of an issue is articulated.*

In the above commentary, Frank Splitt of The Drake Group clearly states his viewpoint on the issue of corruption in college athletics. There are surely many readers out there who have a viewpoint quite different from that of Mr. Splitt. We'd love to hear from you. As always, we welcome those with opposing viewpoint to any of our guest commentaries to state their case as well. Please submit your commentaries to: nick@collegethleticsclips.com.

NOTES

1. According to the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, corruption is the impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle, the inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means (as bribery), and/or the departure from the original or from what is pure and correct.

2. Sack, Allen L., *Counterfeit Amateurs: An Athletes Journey Through the Sixties to the Age of Academic Capitalism*, pp 67-76, Penn State University Press, University Park, PA, 2008. The author tells how the NCAA abandoned its central principle of amateurism in its pursuit of big money in the form of highly commercialized and professionalized big-time college athletics.

The Indy Star's Mark Alesia exposed another aspect of the corruption of the mission of college athletics with his March 17, 2008, piece headlined "Some question NCAA's ticket-market ties." Alesia's article can be found at <http://www.indystar.com/apps/pbcs...0080317/SPORTS/803170365/1247/SPORTS>

3. Yaeger, Don, with Henry, Jim, *Tarnished Heisman: Did Reggie Bush turn his final college season into a six-figure job?*, Pocket Books Division of Simon & Schuster, New York, 10020, 2008. Yaeger exposes the NCAA-prohibited activity in which Bush allegedly engaged, and also shows how the University of Southern California and its coaching staff appeared to have turned a blind eye to the increasingly luxurious life style of their star athlete and his family.

4. Carty, Jim, et al, "ACADEMICS AND ATHLETICS, Ann Arbor News, March 18-21, 2008, mlive.com/wolverines/academics. This four-day series covers an investigative project covering potential academic improprieties/compromises involving University of Michigan athletes. The investigation provides a snapshot of the reality of college athletics in America—a reality that is shamelessly defended by the NCAA and otherwise respectable school presidents and their minions. See also "WHEN INDEPENDENT STUDY RAISES RED FLAGS," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 18, 2008, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/03/18/michigan>.

Systemic academic improprieties were also reported at Auburn University with regard to high grades awarded to Auburn athletes in directed readings courses. These independent study courses required no attendance and little work and would have continued unabated if not for the courageous efforts of Dr. James Gundlach, a faculty member, to expose the fraud. Gundlach is the recipient of the 2008 *Robert Maynard Hutchins Award* based the courage he demonstrated in exposing academic corruption.

Gundlach joins past recipients who also received the award for exposing academic corruption—Jan Kemp, former faculty member at the University of Georgia, Tiffany Mayne, former academic advisor at Louisiana State University, and Linda Bensel Meyers, former Professor of English at the University of Tennessee.

5. Yost, Mark, "[Has Serious Academic Reform of College Athletics Arrived?](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2008

6. Youngerman, Hank, "Champions Who Graduate," *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2008.

7. Ericson, Jon, "When the Commonplace is Instructive," The Afterword to "THE FACULTY-DRIVEN MOVEMENT TO REFORM BIG-TIME COLLEGE SPORTS," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Sequel.pdf

8. Splitt, Frank G., "You Are Kidding About Athletes and Academics," *Wall Street Journal*, p. A9, April 12-13, 2008.

9. Riley, Naomi Schaefer, "Catholicism, Inc." *The Wall Street Journal*, p A9, April 12-13, 2008
10. Splitt, Frank G. "Truth Telling on Campus: Catholic colleges and universities could lead the way," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Truth_Telling_on_Campus.pdf
11. Dan Wetzel, "Hypocrisy 101," *Yahoo! Sports*, March 18, 2008, <http://sports.yahoo.com/ncaab/news?slug=dw-academics031808&prov=yhoo&type=lgns>
12. Splitt, Frank G., "THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF COLLEGE ATHLETES: No Doubt Worse Than Reported," http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Academic_Performance_of_College_Athletes.pdf
13. Comments by The Drake Group on the Draft of a Redesigned IRS Form 990, submitted to the IRS on September 12, 2007, http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_TDG_IRS_Commentary_091207.pdf