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From the SelectedWorks of John R. Kilbourne

Winter December 5, 2003

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College Athletics as a College Education


By JOHN KILBOURNE

Americans' passionate interest in college sports continues to grow. Unfortunately, so do problems with college sports -- like players' receiving illegal benefits, and the increasingly rowdy behavior of fans.

Most critics have called for greater faculty control of and involvement in college athletics, more support for reform from university presidents, and -- most important -- treating athletes on college campuses as students first. Their top-down approach makes it clear that the needs of the institution have outweighed those of the individual athlete. It is not surprising, therefore, that reforms have focused on procedural issues, like how many credits an athlete must take or how many hours he or she can practice. Although those issues are important, so are the generally ignored questions of how the athlete experiences and understands education, including participation in sports. In addition, the top-down orientation, in which athletes are acted upon -- and which makes it easy to absolve them of learning about, or taking responsibility for, their actions -- has little to do with teaching athletes, which ought to be an essential goal of their colleges.

Intimately linked with the institutional emphasis is the assumption that college athletes are, or at least should be, treated the same as other college students. That is not to imply that reform efforts, especially the most recent ones, have not pointed out how athletes differ from their peers. However, the differences that the reformers emphasize have been demographic ones, like race and class, not the differences inherent in being an athlete. But no reform can succeed if it does not come to terms with athletes' daily lives.

Simply put, the problem is that higher education has failed to teach those in sports about sports -- which should be an important part of their education. And by not offering courses on sports for those who are not involved in athletics, colleges have broadened the gap between the two groups of students.

Colleges and universities need to rethink their approach to the reform of intercollegiate athletics. Students -- especially athletes -- should be able to take courses about sports from the perspectives of disciplines like history, philosophy, economics, and sociology. Athletics departments at several colleges offer in-service workshops that cover special issues and services for athletes, like nutrition, study skills, and career planning, but those programs are usually not part of the athletes' required course load, adding yet another time commitment to their heavy schedules. And because the contents are not academic, the programs separate athletes still further from the educational mainstream of the campus.

I conducted a survey of the academic courses on sports required by colleges in Division I-A of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Of the 62 institutions that responded to my questions, only one required its athletes to study sports in contemporary America, or the history of sports. Two required athletes to study sports psychology. None of the institutions required a course in the impact of sports on society, or in the philosophy of sports. Even courses in current topics and problems relevant to athletes' lives -- eating disorders, being a public figure, steroid use, sexual abuse, gambling -- were required at only nine institutions. Colleges and universities are creating a sports culture that is devoid of any understanding of sports.

Athletes should be required to take one or two courses that focus on topics in sports, and other students should be encouraged to do so. As a first step, existing courses on relevant subjects could be reworked to add information about sports.
I also found that the average number of credit hours that athletes could accumulate for participating in intercollegiate sports over a four-year period was 5.2 semester credits (or 7.8 quarter credits). Only 10 of the institutions I studied offered courses through which athletes could receive academic credit for the practice and refinement of their sports skills and techniques. All the time and effort that goes into athletics is apparently not, in the view of most colleges, an important part of education. If those students chose instead to study dance, music, or theater, they could earn 40 or more semester credits for working on their performance skills.

None of the institutions offered a program of study in sports performance, although 34 offered bachelor's degrees in dance. Of course, I also found programs in physical education and sports marketing.

Studying the cultural significance of sports would help campus athletes -- and their peers -- better understand their dual roles on the campus. Athletes would feel more involved in academics and would thus be likely to do better in all of their courses. Moreover, all students in the courses would discover how sports can serve as a lens to examine important questions of race, gender, business, politics, and culture.

It is quite obvious that the institutions that compete at the elite level of intercollegiate sports have failed miserably in their responsibilities to provide education about sports to the young men and women who participate in college athletics. If colleges and universities are sincere about their efforts to reform athletics, they must do better.

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