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EDUCATION AND ATHLETICS ARE NOT MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

Intercollegiate athletics has deservedly come under fire recently after a series of egregious and unacceptable incidents have scarred the image of every college and university athletics program. Unfortunately, the improper actions of a few have tarnished the credibility of hundreds of exceptional athletes that pursue college sports in a meaningful way within the context of their education. The resulting public response to the athletics crisis reflects the inordinate cultural attention given to athletics as the bandwagon of media experts gathers momentum. The discussion currently focuses on a dangerously increasing chasm between academics and athletics. Wouldn't the focus be better directed to measure the value of a diverse educational experience for all students? Now is the time to return to our personal and institutional mission.



Jim Murphy



In fulfilling the important obligations of its mission, an institution must identify, recruit, yield and retain students who are capable of taking advantage of the teaching and learning resources offered by the school as well as create appropriate intellectual, emotional and physical challenges and opportunities for its students. Under these circumstances, intercollegiate athletics can be compatible with the primary mission of the college.

Most institutional mission statements direct the respective college or university as to the personal and intellectual development of their students. Our Statement of Purpose asserts: "The primary purpose of Davidson College is to assist students in developing humane instincts and disciplined and creative minds for lives of leadership and service." Also included is, "As a liberal arts college, Davidson emphasizes those studies, disciplines and activities that are mentally, spiritually and physically liberating."

While these statements are very general in nature, they certainly suggest the disciplined and physically challenging environment created by a competitive athletics program.

The value of the college experience comes through connectivity and interaction, not isolation or homogenization. The athletics population is likely to be as much or more ethnically and economically diverse than the student body, and with maturity, the natural blending with other students will take place, but opportunities for such interaction must be

created. Institutions must not be willing to accept athletics isolation and the suggestion that athletes will inherently weaken the learning experience of the entire student body is absurd. The inference that students must have similar SAT scores to learn together is misdirected. The environment created with talented students comprising a diverse community of athletes, musicians, scientists, writers, actors, volunteers, artists and other success oriented young people with a comparable history of successful academic performance will generate a remarkable educational experience. The challenge for each institution is in identifying the appropriately targeted level of its students' academic success to best serve its academic mission. It's not unreasonable to suggest that an important part of a college education occurs outside of the classroom. Athletics programs are in trouble not because athletics inherently breeds corruption, but because too many of those athletes have academic goals that are incompatible with their respective institution. It is crucial that athletes "fit" the university they attend. Far too many recruited athletes are unable to succeed academically at the institution where they enroll.

The most recent economic woes of intercollegiate athletics largely exist because the incentives for competitive success are financial, and therefore, misplaced. The professionalism of college sports has clouded the role of athletics in higher education at every level, but the NCAA largely lacks the authority to dictate fiscal restraint to its members and it's the schools themselves, and particularly college presidents and trustees that must curb the spending spree. Current NCAA Working Groups call for financial reform, but the measures are broad, including football scholarship reductions and fewer competition dates. The Working Groups give little advice on how to accomplish such reform, but a clear goal should be to correlate revenue distribution with academic success. Winning has its own rewards and they need not be supplemented with NCAA revenue distribution dollars.

Models of successfully integrating an athletics program into campus life can be found throughout the NCAA. Unfortunately, the tremendous number of success stories in the athletics strata at institutions other than Division I FBS, rarely get told. The well being of individual students, the credibility of our institutions of higher education and the integrity of intercollegiate athletics must be at the core of our decision-making. To get it right, we must practice this every day. Having invested ourselves fully in these important obligations, we can then turn to the liberating pursuit of the athletics experience and the success stories that are sure to follow.

Jim Murphy is the director of athletics at Davidson.