

Reversing the Culture of Detrimental Behavior in NCAA Football Programs

By Troy Vincent, Vice President of NFL Player Engagement

“Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport, and their participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the physical, mental and social benefits to be derived. Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises.” --2010-2011 NCAA Division I Manual, page 4

Overview

One of the most significant and life-altering occurrences within a young player’s career is most likely the moment he is offered the sought after scholarship that includes the invitation to play college football. Along with the advantages of such a scholarship comes an array of opportunities that have the potential to change a life. I know, because it was precisely such a moment that changed mine. Not only does it allow a player to pursue a college degree, but it opens the door to ultimately playing for the NFL. For a student-athlete, the American dream is suddenly in full-swing and if the stakes seem incredibly high, it is because they often are.

Unfortunately, not all student-athletes are prepared to handle the inexorable daily pressures of their college experiences let alone the ubiquitous moral challenges that come with such extraordinary opportunity. It is off the field that the character of the unprepared young player is taunted and tested, often by the very same people charged to protect him. It is precisely at this troubling turning point—as we move for closer examination of existing cultures of colleges and universities--that our discussion begins.

The recent rash of football violations at member institutions indicates that the system is broken and is in urgent need of being fixed. For a plethora of reasons, beginning with the well-being of the student-athlete right through to the future of the game, we need to figure out what has gone wrong and take whatever steps necessary to make it right. Stronger academic entrance and performance requirements may lead to a positive shift in the overall quality of the student athlete, but such actions will likely be only partially effective. Long term measures must be taken to address the on-campus culture that cultivates behavior resulting in cheating, illegalities, immorality, and unethical conduct.

It is easy to enter the debate armed with reasons why student athletes cheat, why member institutions cheat, and/or choose to look the other way. Pay for play, some ascertain, would stop cheating; while others claim NCAA rule changes would stop cheating. In fact, a multitude of suggestions have been offered up and tossed in the arena of public debate; all aimed at eliminating the temptation to cheat. One of the most troubling reasons given for student athletes to cheat is their desperate attempt to fill their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. In these cases, it seems the instinct to survive outruns their moral compass.

A study entitled “The Price of Poverty in Big Time College Sport” by the National College Players Association and Drexel University thoroughly discusses the wide disparity between the revenue generated in Division I sports and the money given athletes in scholarships, especially as it relates to their mandatory and expected hourly commitment to play the sport.

The study concludes that the average scholarship shortfall (out-of-pocket expenses) for each “full” scholarship athlete was approximately \$3222 per player during the 2010-11 school year. It suggests that the room and board provisions in a full scholarship leave 85% of players living on campus and 86% of players living off campus living below the federal poverty line. At the same time, coaches and member institutions reap seven figure salaries and great windfalls, respectively.

According to research by Charles Clotfelter, an economist at Duke, the average compensation for head football coaches at public universities, now more than \$2 million, has grown 750 percent (adjusted for inflation) since the Regents decision in 1984; that’s more than 20 times the cumulative 32 percent raise for college professors.

Clotfelter points out:

“The moral logic is hard to fathom: the NCAA bans personal messages on the bodies of the players, and penalizes players for trading their celebrity status for discounted tattoos—but it codifies precisely how and where commercial insignia from multinational corporations can be displayed on college players, for the financial benefit of the colleges. Last season, while the NCAA investigated him and his father for the recruiting fees they’d allegedly sought, Cam Newton compliantly wore at least 15 corporate logos—one on his jersey, four on his helmet visor, one on each wristband, one on his

pants, six on his shoes, and one on the headband he wears under his helmet—as part of Auburn’s \$10.6 million deal with Under Armour.”

Even college football icon Tim Tebow, in his book *“Through My Eyes”*, called into question the morality of NCAA rules that afforded his coach a million dollar bonus. Tebow wrote that at that time all he could afford as a Christmas gift to his mother was to pull weeds in her chicken coop. The NCPA-Drexel study used the recently negotiated NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement to calculate what a Division I football player would be paid according to fair market value. It found that the fair market value of the average FBS football player was \$120,048 per year.

The NCPA-Drexel study says, “Tebow is known for his strong personal and moral convictions, which is what likely helped him refrain from accepting extra benefits and violating NCAA rules. But many can question what the average, high profile, cash-strapped 19-year-old college athlete would do if offered benefits that the NCAA prohibits. Tebow was frustrated enough with NCAA rules that he criticized its rules in his book. Many other players choose to go a step further.”

This statement by the authors of the NCPA-Drexel study is likely overlooked in deference to many of the other important findings. It comes down to strong personal and moral convictions--in a word, character. Trying to justify why people cheat and then appease the reason, only treats the symptom, not the cause. Cheaters cheat because they choose to do so. It is, and always will be, a character issue.

Studies abound as industry and academic leaders seek ways to crack down on cheating or eliminate it entirely. The problem, however, is deeply rooted in the culture of the football industry. Coaches and players alike face temptations that are budget related, both institutionally and personally. Football produces huge revenue windfalls for NCAA member institutions, making football king of all things. Campus identity can easily turn from academic missions to football-influenced priorities, leaving academics trampled on the locker room floor.

Even NCAA President Mark Emmert believes that big changes must come. Emmert said in July that “The integrity of collegiate athletics is seriously challenged today by rapidly growing pressures coming from many directions. We have reached a point where incremental change is not sufficient to meet these challenges. I want us to act more aggressively and in a more comprehensive way than we have in the past. A few new tweaks of the rules won’t get the job done.”

At the NCAA Division I Presidential Retreat in August of 2011, Emmert reiterated, "It's time for creative solutions to the significant issues facing intercollegiate athletics. In order to protect student-athlete success, the collegiate model, amateurism and competitive equity, there must be substantive change to the enterprise."

Notwithstanding, the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics says that to pay college athletes would be "an unacceptable surrender to despair." "Scholarship athletes are already paid," declared the Knight Commission members, "in the most meaningful way possible: with a free education."

Immediate past NCAA president Myles Brand echoed this sentiment in an interview with Sports Illustrated's Michael Rosenberg. Here is an excerpt from that interview (as documented in the NCPA-Drexel study):

Brand: "They can't be paid."
Rosenberg: "Why?"
Brand: "Because they're amateurs."
Rosenberg: "What makes them amateurs?"
Brand: "Well, they can't be paid."
Rosenberg: "Why not?"
Brand: "Because they're amateurs."
Rosenberg: "Who decided they are amateurs?"
Brand: "We did."
Rosenberg: "Why?"
Brand: "Because we don't pay them."

These days, many are promoting giving into the temptation to take away the temptation by simply paying football athletes. Given the institutional inertia to redefine amateur status and establish a pay for play system, these voices may not move the political powers for some time to come.

The macro-debate over redefining amateur status, pay for play, instituting individual scholarship trusts, adopting Olympic rules on amateur status, and more will rage on and on, while at the same time, the problem continues to fester, athletes and programs continue to cheat, and athletes who had nothing to do with the cheating, are punished by the NCAA. Reform will only come at the end of a long, winding road that entails good sense, politics, and compromise. It is unlikely at any time in the near future that major changes will be instituted.

Notwithstanding, most would agree that reform is necessary. The multi-million dollar question remains -- will leadership take action? We are at a crossroads, where millions of dollars in TV contracts, sponsorships, endorsements, and advanced instant media has made it impossible to hide the tremendous amount of money swirling around the student athlete's world as well as the temptations that go along with it. There is, quite frankly, a new world order in amateur athletics; one that is strongly driven by money; leaving in its wake a cry for stand-up leadership and good decision-making, devoid of powerful influencers and agendas.

It is in this present environment that the century old idea of young people going to college for an education is either found or lost. The fact that they are still referred to as student athletes and not athlete students clearly shows us where priorities lie and why those priorities need to be changed.

The challenge and the call to action to reform must be issued, otherwise the prospect exists that college athletics could implode or at the very least, exist for the wrong reasons and for the wrong people. Clearly, it is up to those of us who believe in the value of the college experience both in the classroom and on the field, to make sure that never happens.

The National Football League is a vested stakeholder in this debate for the obvious reason that NCAA member institutions serve as a pipeline for professional football players. But it's much more than that. NFL Player Engagement is tasked with building the entire football athlete from the prep years through his playing career and beyond. Not only are we interested in world-class athletes, but we are committed to doing our part to assist in building men of great character; men who will continue to be successful, long after their football experience. Developing good character and instilling values into today's student-athlete will mean that tomorrow's NFL player is much more likely to become a better person; citizen, husband, father and player.

To that end, there are specific, micro strategies and tactics that can be employed to assist the athlete and the member institution existing under current NCAA regulations to address the culture that foments cheating. This paper is written to encourage member institutions to take action on cultural change, policies, practices and enforcement that relate to character accountability and the development of a well-rounded, educated student-athlete of integrity.

During the past two years, as Vice President of Player Engagement, I have visited over 75 member institutions, auditing the football programs and studying how policy impacts both on- and off-campus behavior. This white paper serves as a view from the League on best practices that should be adopted by all member institutions to:

- Intervene in the current culture that promotes bad behavior;
- Develop and institutionalize a system that promotes an academic-first approach toward the student athlete;
- Emphasizes athletic academic completion with a course of study that is beneficial to the long term success of the student athlete.

Campus Culture

Campus culture that allows and fosters athletic bullying (the athlete controlling the institution) and athlete storing (putting the athlete in easy class work and meaningless majors) may beget temporal short term advantages in football program records, but over the long term, will surely be detrimental to the institution, the program, and the athlete.

Athlete Storing or Academic Clustering is when a significant percentage (generally considered 25%) of an athletic team shares a common academic major. According to a study “Academic Clustering and Major Selection of Intercollegiate Student-Athletes” by Ray G. Schneider published in the College Student Journal March 1, 2010, Division I-A Football routinely “stores” athletes in certain majors.

The study investigated the academic majors of Big 12 Conference football players for the years 1996, 2001 and 2006. The Big 12 Conference was selected because the member institutions tended to be representative of intercollegiate athletics. The results of the study indicated that the storing of football athletes was major:

- In the 2006 season 51.6% of the 424 junior and senior football players were in either social science or business majors;
- In the 2001 season, 59.58% of the 240 junior and senior football players were in either social science, business or communication majors;
- In the 1996 season, 37% of the 192 junior and senior football players were in either social science or communication majors.

According to the study, in 2006, seven of the 12 member institutions had 23.5% to 70% of their football athletes clustered in social science, liberal arts or agricultural leadership and development majors. In most of these institutions, the football athlete population was 300% to 2,000% higher than the general student body for these majors.

A similar study was conducted in 2006 of ACC football athletes. "Academic Majors of Upperclassmen Football Players in the Atlantic Coast Conference: An Analysis of Academic Clustering Comparing White and Minority Players" was written by Jeffrey J. Fountain and Peter S. Finley of Nova Southeastern University. This study found that the 11 universities studied had from 25% to 73% of their football players clustered in certain majors. Additionally, minority football players were clustered in social science, liberal arts, sport management, or general studies. White football players were more often clustered in engineering, education, business or science/math/technology majors. The ratio of these minority clustered majors to white clustered majors was approximately 1.5:1, with some specific majors 3:1.

These practices are foundation stones toward creating on-campus cultures where athletes are running the member institution (athletic bullying) because of their privileged status and entitlement mentality, resulting in negative behaviors being reinforced, enabled and magnified.

Aside from the pay for play debate, member institutions at the Division I level are unable to effectively promote leadership and good decision-making when student athletes are not required to take policies--both academic and conduct--seriously, or when they view the attempted enforcement of such as hypocrisy.

The impact of campus culture on NFL players is becoming more evident. An internal study of arrest records in the NFL vs. graduates of top football schools could be construed as a reflection on campus culture. For example, the top three member institutions that have produced the most NFL football players are Notre Dame (1), University of Southern California (2), and The Ohio State University (3). An interesting statistic separates Notre Dame from the other two. While Notre Dame has produced the most NFL players all time, it also has the lowest number of arrests (3) of graduates in the NFL from 2000-10. OSU ranks 2nd in graduates with NFL arrests (19) and USC ranks 6th (16) over the same ten year period. Both have recently faced NCAA investigations and have had players suspended and titles removed during the past decade.

In 1999, Notre Dame faced a two year probation beginning in 2000 over gifts that were given by a woman who was romantically involved with several football players. This was the first time in history that the Notre Dame football program faced any NCAA sanctions and it has not had any since.

At the time of the NCAA verdict, Notre Dame President Father Edward A. Malloy emphasized an increased vigilance to prevent any further rules violations. "Notre Dame has a proud tradition in athletics, not only for doing well but also for doing right," he said. "We regret these incidents, and I pledge my own and my administration's most diligent effort to avoid such problems in the future."

Among his immediate actions, Malloy ordered: "Athletics personnel are now expected to report any situation that even suggests improper conduct or potential rules violations. More than ever before, coaches will be evaluated on the progress their players make off the field. And every official fan club of a Notre Dame team has been disbanded."

The actions, however, to prevent future violations went far deeper and could serve as a model program and starting point for every NCAA member institution to consider in fostering leadership and good decision-making in their football athletes, holding coaches, athletic directors, boosters and other university officials and personnel accountable, and creating a true student-athlete culture on campus.

Academics, Athletics, Policy, Practices and Accountability

Of the 75-plus member institutions that I have audited in the past 18 months, Notre Dame stands out as having a plan that puts athletes as students first with the academic reputation of the university ahead of athletics, holding all stakeholders accountable for the well being of the student-athlete as well as his development as a man.

The University of Notre Dame Faculty Board on Athletics Manual provides a great deal of wisdom, policies, practices and accountability methods that when implemented builds the value of the football athlete as a student, as an athlete, and as a future productive member of society. It is from this manual that I have derived specific policies that can be adopted by the NCAA that will make both short- and long-term improvements in the overall member university environment; will develop character; serve honor; and build young men into productive, law abiding adults irrespective of their choice of careers along life's journey.

My recommendations are as follows:

Subscribe to a higher authority

Notre Dame boldly emphasizes that it is a Catholic university espousing Christian values and principles. This is central to the development of the human person and the pursuit of excellence, the nurturing of character, etc.

While not all member institutions will choose to recognize Christian values and principles, there must be foundational principles upon which the university's culture is built. These values are the fountain from which the moral and ethical construct of the university flow. These central values must be agreed upon, shared, and lived from the President through all aspects of the institution. Faculty, staff, students, student athletes all must know them, and know that the institution is serious about them.

Presidential control over athletics

The President of the institution must have the final say and complete control over the intercollegiate athletic program. The Athletic Director should report directly to the president. A Faculty Board on Athletics which advises the president also should report to the president.

Faculty Board on Athletics

A Faculty Board on Athletics should be established. The FBA advises the president, reviews policies, procedures and practices that impact the student-athletes' educational experience. From the concerns of the student-athletes to overall data regarding admissions, academic performance, degree progress, and graduation rates, the FBA continuously assesses the effectiveness of the university's actions in support of the student-athlete. It reviews and revises procedures for resolving scheduling conflicts, establishes guidelines of athletic schedules, votes on proposed schedules as well as nominations for captains of the team.

The FBA should be comprised of a mix of ex officio, appointed and elected members and should meet a minimum of once a month. Under no circumstances should athletic representatives have a vote on this board. A suggested composition of the FBA is:

- Elected members from the teaching and research faculty of each College;
- At large elected members from the teaching and faculty of the university;

- Appointed members by the president, including the Athletic Director, the director of Academic Services for Student Athletes, the Vice President of Student Affairs, and a representative of the Office of the President;
- A Chair appointed by the president from the faculty.

The Vice President of Student Affairs, the Athletic Director, the Director of Academic Services for Student Athletes and the representative of the Office of the President serve as non-voting, ex officio members. In the event the FBA is called into executive session, the ex officio members may be excused.

Academics First

First and foremost the member institution must be devoted to providing all students an outstanding education. There must be no special treatment for student athletes.

Basic Principles:

- Only accept those student athletes who demonstrate, on the best available academic and character-based information, the capacity to compete for a degree at the institution.
- Provide suitable and appropriate assistance to student athletes that they will be able to meet the demands of both academic and athletic competition.
- The institution must strive to schedule practices and competitions so as to minimize conflicts with classes and other academic assignments of student athletes.
- Expect student athletes to maintain coursework and grade point averages necessary to complete a degree on time; any exception should require approval of the FBA.

Student Responsibilities

The member institution should hold student athletes to the same standard of conduct that applies to other students AND a higher level of behavior appropriate to their visibility.

Basic Principles:

- Student athletes must comply with all institution rules and guidelines and the institution should enforce these rules according to procedures applicable to all students.

- Student athletes will be fully integrated into the student body with student athletes living in resident halls. There should be no separate resident halls or sections of residence halls for student athletes.
- The appropriate sports medicine and athletics training personnel will alone determine whether an injury or illness will prevent an athlete from participating in practices or competition.
- All member institutions should make student athletes subject to regular, random and unannounced drug testing according to a pre-established protocol, independently from, but working in conjunction with, the NCAA mandated drug testing program.
- Chaplains should be provided for athletic teams that include pastoral care and consistent reminder and calling to the institution's guidelines of higher authority.
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Coaching

Coaches must represent not only the best in athletic instruction, but also subscribe fully to the institution's values.

Basic Principles:

- Coaches personal and professional lives must reflect the institution's highest standards of behavior, always acting in ways that do not jeopardize the institutional or personal integrity, or the welfare of the student athletes.
- Coaches must be expected to appreciate the academic primacy of the institution and emphasize such expectations during recruitment and education of the student athletes.
- Coaches must undergo a comprehensive orientation when coming on board and continuing education thereafter emphasizing the standards of both the institution and the NCAA.
- Coaches must understand that under no circumstances will the institution treat institution or NCAA violations lightly.

Administration of the Athletic Department

All personnel in the Athletic Department must conduct themselves in the highest standards of behavior, adhering to the policies and procedures of the institution, its conferences, and the NCAA.

Basic Principles:

- The institution maintains full and direct control of the financial operations of the department.
- Generation of revenue must always take into consideration the institution's integrity and priorities.
- The institution should be committed to the principle of racial, gender, and ethnic diversity in its coaching and administrative staffs.

Policies, Practices and Guidelines--Principles to action

By setting forth the principles by which athletics and student athletics are subjected, the real teeth in reversing NCAA cultural trends is found in the enforcement of policies, the practices that are institutionalized and the guidelines of fairness and justice. These include, again, placing academics ahead of athletics as balanced by common sense and a dedication to the welfare of the student athlete. From scheduling to class/exam conflict resolution to eligibility and student life, it is the enforcement of policies and the practice of them that ultimately establish a culture of character, honor, responsibility, and promise for the future.

Basic Principles:

- The FBA will approve all scheduling.
- Playing schedules for all varsity sports must be constructed to that student athletes do not miss more than three classes in the Monday-Wednesday-Friday sequences or three classes in the Tuesday-Thursday sequences in a single semester for regular season play.
- At least four days in advance of travel, a list of traveling student athletes, the classes they will miss and the faculty members who teach those classes must be approved and distributed to the appropriate faculty members.
- All regular season competition is prohibited and practice is not recommended on exam days.
- In the event of post season competition during final examinations, the FBA will notify in writing at least one week before the first day of examinations all Deans, listing all traveling student athletes and the precise schedule of travel. In turn, the Deans will notify the faculty members of the conflict and the traveling student athlete will meet with each faculty member explaining the absence in the final exam to arrange an alternative date for the exam.

- In the case of a fifth year of eligibility, the student athlete must petition for a fifth year and the petition will be reviewed by the FBA. The head coach and the athletic director must support the petition and the Office of Student Affairs must approve the petition.
- Student athletes must reside on campus at least until their senior year (first six semesters). They may seek permission to live off campus during their senior year. Permission can only be sought if the student athlete is in good standing with the institution, has prior approval from his coach, and is not on disciplinary probation.
- The privilege of living off campus may be revoked if the student exercises disciplinary
- Problems or violates team or institution policies.
- Team captains are approved by the FBA and must meet the highest standard of leadership and academic excellence.

Conclusion

In an Op Ed for the New York Times on September 23, columnist David Brooks lamented “As many universities have lost confidence in their ability to instill character, the moral mission of the university has withered.” He says now commercialism and professionalism have filled the void where everybody gets paid except the players. This is the cry that has the potential to kill amateur athletics because the norm appears to have become the athlete-student rather than the student-athlete.

In the first decade following the new millennium, “Inside Higher Education” reported that 53 of 120 FBS were caught violating NCAA rules. Those are just the ones who got caught. This is an integrity and character issue that in the very least can be addressed by changing the way member institutions treat the student athlete, by holding him accountable, by ensuring an education and by instilling values through a dedicated moral mission coming from the top.

This debate over whether to pay for play will continue on. Meantime, the NCAA has the opportunity to reform from the higher ground, emphasizing character, leadership and human capital development. It is imperative that the NCAA act, and act decisively and soon before Congress mandates changes that may or may not be beneficial to the amateur programs and to the amateur athlete. Self determination is preferred to mandatory dictation. We need to get this right.

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