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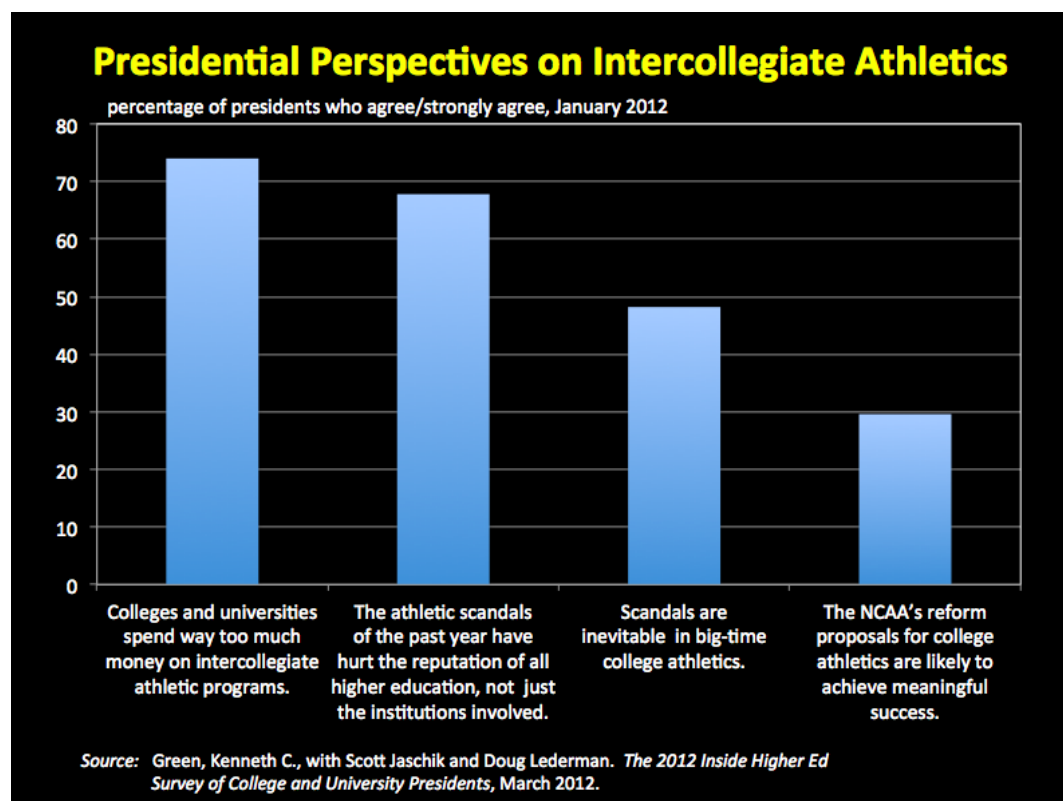
They of Little Faith: College Presidents and Big-Time Athletics

Submitted by Casey Green on July 30, 2012 - 7:03pm

Blog: [Digital Tweed](#) ^[1]

As noted in the report on *The 2012 Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University Presidents* ^[2] that I wrote for *Inside Higher Ed*, the past year was not a good one for intercollegiate athletics. Highly publicized athletic scandals at the University of Miami, Ohio State, Syracuse, and of course Penn State, cast a large shadow over intercollegiate sports. Also, Pulitzer-prize winning author [Taylor Branch's October 2011 *Atlantic* article, "The Shame of College Sports,"](#) ^[3] and his 2011 book, *The Cartel*, highlighted what Branch and many others view as the institutional abuse of athletes in big-time collegiate programs and some significant problems with the NCAA's role as the overseer of intercollegiate athletics.

Yet in many ways some of the most telling comments about the recent scandals and the criticisms of big-time athletics have come not from off-campus critics but from college and university presidents themselves. Fully three-fourths (75.0 percent) of the 1,002 college and university presidents who participated in the January 2012 *Inside Higher Ed* survey "agree/strongly agree" that colleges and universities "spend way too much money" on intercollegiate sports; fully two-thirds (67.8 percent), believe that "the athletic scandals of the past year have hurt the reputation of all of higher education, not just the institutions involved," and almost half (48.2 percent) view the recent scandals as an "inevitable" byproduct of big-time athletic programs. Moreover, presidents are not, in aggregate, optimistic about the prospects for reform: less than a third (29.6 percent) agree that the [current NCAA reform proposals](#) ^[4] will "achieve meaningful success."



Asked about the impact of the recent athletic scandals on their own institution, the majority of presidents were surprisingly confident that similar problems *could not* happen at their campus (52.1 percent); another fifth (21.6 percent) stated that these issues are not applicable to their institution. The presidents of private universities were far more confident than their peers that their institutions are safe from the recent scandals that have plagued others: almost three-fourths of private university presidents (71.0 percent) believe that the athletic program problems seen elsewhere could not happen at their institutions, compared to less than half (45.8 percent) of the chief executives at public universities. In contrast, the presidents of public baccalaureate colleges and of community colleges acknowledged more vulnerability than most of their peers about potential athletic program problems: just over a third (35.5 percent) of the leaders at public baccalaureate colleges and two-fifths (41.1 percent) of community college presidents expressed confidence that their athletic programs are safe from potential problems.

Moreover, as of January 2012 (and prior to the recent [Freeh report](#) ^[5] on the situation at Penn State), presidents reported that highly publicized athletic scandals at Ohio State, Penn State, Syracuse, the University of Miami and elsewhere had not been a catalyst for major changes at most campuses: fewer than a fifth (17.1 percent) of presidents reported new rules governing their athletic programs, although the numbers were higher for public than for private institutions.

Yet perhaps the most damning commentary on intercollegiate athletics emerges when the survey data are cut to compare the responses of NACC Division I presidents against those of their peers in other four-year institutions and in community colleges. As shown below, Division I presidents were more likely than their peers to agree that the recent scandals had cast a large shadow over all of higher education, and that athletic scandals are inevitable in big-time college athletics. Division I presidents were also less likely

than their peers to agree that “colleges and universities spend way too much money on intercollegiate athletics (68.9 percent for Division I presidents vs. 74.7 percent for the presidents of other four-year institutions and 77.5 percent for community college presidents).

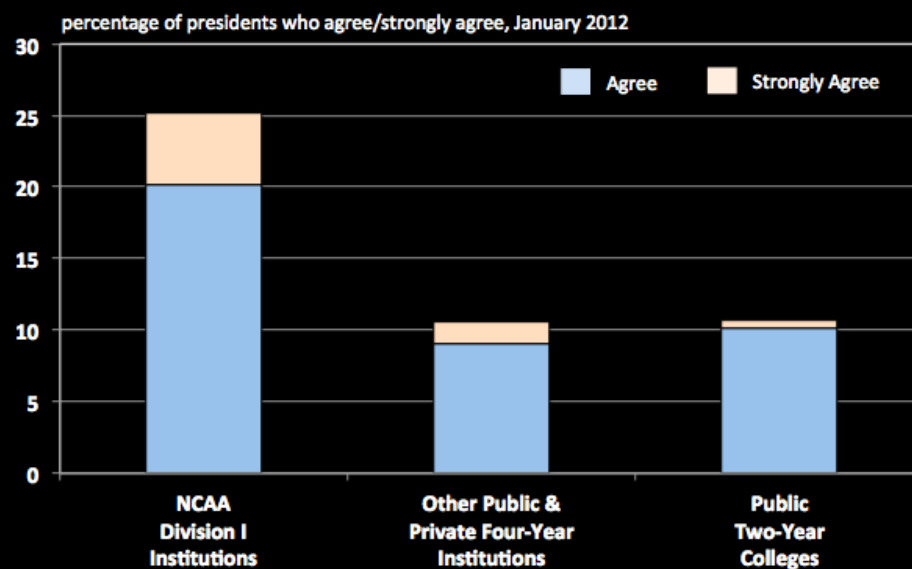
Presidential Perspectives on Intercollegiate Athletics

percentage of college and university presidents who agree/strongly agree, January 2012	NCAA Division 1 Institutions (n=122)	Other Public & Private Four-Year Institutions (n=435)	Public Two-Year Colleges (n=338)
The athletic scandals of the past year have hurt the reputation of all higher education, not just the institutions involved.	79.8	66.7	68.9
Colleges and universities spend way too much money on intercollegiate athletic programs.	68.9	74.7	77.5
Scandals are inevitable in big-time college athletics.	51.3	49.0	45.1
The NCAA’s reform proposals for college athletics are likely to achieve meaningful success.	31.9	28.5	32.0
Big-time college athletics cannot be fixed without government intervention of some kind.	25.2	23.0	29.1
The presidents of big-time athletic programs are in control of their programs.	25.2	10.6	10.7

Source: Green, Kenneth C., with Scott Jaschik and Doug Lederman. *The 2012 Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University Presidents*, March 2012.

However, just one set of numbers offer telling details about the challenges of presidential command and control over intercollegiate athletics: just a fourth of Division I presidents agree/strongly agree that “the presidents of big-time athletic programs are in control of their programs,” compared to just a tenth of their peers in other four-year colleges and in community colleges. Stated another way, three-fourths of Division I presidents believe that they and their peers *are not* in control of their athletic programs. An even larger number – nine in ten – of their presidential peers in other segments and sectors have little confidence that the presidents of campuses engaged in big-time collegiate athletics are in control of these programs.

“The presidents of big-time athletic programs are in control of their programs.”



Source: Green, Kenneth C., with Scott Jaschik and Doug Lederman. *The 2012 Inside Higher Ed Survey of College and University Presidents*, March 2012.

For the record, I am a fan of intercollegiate athletics: I’ve spent time in college stadiums, campus athletic centers, and also on the couch watching a few “big games” (and many small ones). But it’s more than a little bit distressing to learn that college presidents have little confidence in the “command and control” they and their peers exercise over big-campus intercollegiate athletic programs.

The recent round of athletic scandals is a thrown gauntlet, a challenge for presidents to be more involved in the operational aspects of collegiate athletics, to stand up for the higher values espoused for intercollegiate programs and to stand strong against the activities that and individuals who would usurp those higher values.

Kenneth C. Green [6]

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