



## **The Place of Intercollegiate Athletics in Higher Education: Faculty Control**

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# *The Place of Intercollegiate Athletics in Higher Education*

## *Faculty Control*

By MARCUS L. PLANT

ONE who feels the urge to write an article on intercollegiate athletics probably ought to lie down until the feeling goes away. Certainly the volume of literature on the subject needs no augmentation. Furthermore, if there is one segment of the entire field in which angels should fear to tread, it is the area of "faculty control" of athletics. These are fighting words on almost any campus, and the possibility of making converts by discussing the subject is remote. It is with some misgiving, therefore, that I present the observations that follow. It should be added that they reflect only my personal views and not those of anyone else in the University or the Conference with which I am associated.

The principle of institutional control of intercollegiate athletics is generally accepted in the United States today. Indeed, adherence to this principle is a necessary condition of institutional membership in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The idea is that if individual students or teams of students purport to represent an institution of higher learning in intercollegiate athletic competition, the control of that activity and the responsibility for it ought to be vested in the institution itself. It ought not to rest with alumni, or friends of the institution, or private clubs, or business entrepreneurs. The only qualification of this concept is that if the institution belongs to an athletic conference or association, a certain degree of control over

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its athletic program may be exercised by that conference or association. If it belongs to the NCAA, certain controls will be exerted by that body.

The foregoing philosophy is so much a part of our thinking today that it is sometimes forgotten that it did not always prevail and that serious problems existed in the past when educational institutions did not accept responsibility for the athletic program. Those who sometimes urge that the colleges give up intercollegiate athletics disregard the lessons of history.

When it comes to effectuating institutional control over athletics, however, there is some question concerning where the responsibility ought to lie within the institution. Opinion on this question is by no means unanimous. There is considerable difference of view as to the part that ought to be played by the faculty of the institution, as distinguished from the administrative officers.

In some quarters it is held that the faculty as such should not concern itself with, or participate in the control or administration of, the athletic program. That activity is deemed to fall within the province of the president, or his deputy, or some body of administrative personnel. A few years ago I visited the vice-president of a large and famous university, and our discussion turned to certain serious athletic problems his school was facing. I inquired what position the faculty took on the matter. He reacted as if my question was completely irrelevant and replied that the faculty had not expressed any view. In response to further questions he indicated that neither the faculty as a whole nor any of its committees or organizations had been invited to express any opinion, nor was any invitation to do so planned. It was clear that in his judgment the faculty's sphere of activity was limited to the classroom.

In other places, certainly in the Middle West, the view is commonly held that there should be faculty control of athletics. The basic philosophy is that the intercollegiate athletic program has validity only if it is an integral part of the total educational program of the school. As such, it ought to be in the control of the group whose function it is to plan and carry out the educational program. The debatable issues revolve around what constitutes faculty control and how it should be implemented. Should control be exercised by the faculty as a whole? Should it be placed in that body of the faculty variously called the faculty senate or the faculty council or the university council? Should it be exercised by a committee composed solely of faculty members, or by a board composed of faculty members, alumni, and students in which the faculty members are in a majority? If the entire faculty is not to perform this task, how should members of the controlling group be selected? Should they be appointed by the president or elected by the faculty? Should the faculty nominate candidates and the president appoint from the nominees? To what matters should faculty control extend? Should it be limited to so-called "broad questions of policy," whatever that expression may mean? Should it embrace decisions on matters such as what buildings shall be built and where they shall be

located? Should it extend to details such as whether to resurface the tennis courts, whether to build a facility for bowling on the green, or whether to permit a community dog show in the field house?

Obviously, the specification of the part to be played by the faculty is not quite as simple as is sometimes supposed. Nor is it likely that a plan can be developed that will have universal validity. The most that can be done in a discussion such as this is to outline some of the elements that should be given appropriate weight in arriving at an acceptable *modus operandi*.

INSTEAD of plunging into tables of organization, it may be more profitable to consider the nature of the task, with particular reference to the attitudes and characteristics that ought to be possessed by faculty men who are to engage in the control of intercollegiate athletics. In taking this approach I consciously tip my hand to some extent, for the implication is that not all faculty men should have a part in such control. This is indeed my view. The mere fact that one is a member of an institution's faculty ought not to entitle one automatically to take part in the control of athletics. Faculty control can only be enduring and effective if it is reasonable, responsible, and wise. If it is arbitrary, or capricious, or irresponsible, it will be discredited. I hold that any task can be carried out successfully, regardless of organizational arrangements, if the right people for that job are put to work at it. Conversely, if the wrong people for that task are attempting to carry it out, the inevitable result will be failure and discredit, no matter how well conceived the organizational arrangements may be. Thus the suitability of the men who are going to be given the job is crucial.

Intercollegiate athletics, which Frank Gardner has described as a tiger held by the tail, calls for certain qualities on the part of those who are to hold the tail. Sterling character and a high order of mental ability are attributes that are abundant in a university faculty. But they are not enough. There are additional important considerations, of which the following list is suggestive, though not exhaustive.

The men who are to guide the program ought to have a lively but balanced interest in athletic activities and to be reasonably sympathetic toward the program and its objectives. This is not to say that they should be zealots or worshippers of athletic heroes, for the zealot will bring swift and sure disaster upon the whole program. The point deserves mention because a substantial number of faculty people have not the slightest interest in this phase of college life. Such people ought not to be asked to give thought to athletic matters, and, more important, ought not to be required, or even permitted, to vote in the determination of athletic policy. To place them in a position where they must do so is an injustice to them and to the athletic program.

Sympathy with the program and its objectives is suggested on the theory that those who are opposed to intercollegiate athletics (and there are a certain number on every campus) are not likely to make a con-

structive contribution to the cause of faculty control if they have a part in it. Their approach will be nihilistic. The result will be, not the demise of intercollegiate athletics, but the demise of faculty control.

The faculty athletic controller ought to be a person with a judicious habit of mind. He should be one who does not reach his decisions hastily or on the basis of his visceral reactions, but who studies the facts and listens to the arguments before he formulates his judgment. It is sometimes assumed that this is an ever-present characteristic of the professorial mind. I respectfully question that assumption, at least when matters of athletics are involved. Frequently, I have encountered faculty men who were national authorities in their own fields and who would not dream of stating an offhand conclusion in the area of their special competence, but who made the most dogmatic and sweeping assertions on athletic affairs without any substantial study or previous thought on the subject. On this topic even careful scholars seem prone to assume an attitude comparable to that of the P.T.A. parent who suddenly becomes an expert on elementary education, and who thinks he can give all the answers in simple fashion right off the top of his head. For example, a renowned professor, whose name would probably be recognized by many of my readers, only recently said to me, "This whole business of financial aid to athletes is ridiculous. College athletics should be either entirely amateur, with the boys receiving no aid at all, or it should be entirely professional, with the boys being paid wages competitive with the salaries paid by the professional clubs. Make your choice and stop fooling around!" I am sure he would never make an assertion in his own field in this manner. Another professor recently stood before a general faculty meeting at my University while we were discussing athletic problems and announced, "I do not come here to expose myself to persuasion; I come to see that my prejudices are enacted into law!"

I submit that men whose minds are likely to function in this fashion when they leave their areas of special study ought not to be permitted to have a voice in controlling intercollegiate athletics. The major problems in the athletic field are extremely complicated. They involve basic educational philosophy, economic factors, sociological factors (including race relations), administrative problems, public-relations elements, and, in some places, heavy political overtones. They will never be solved by off-the-cuff generalities or by enacting prejudices into law, however laudatory they may be. They will be solved the way most other difficult problems are solved, which is by careful, dispassionate study and a great deal of trial and error.

In connection with the last point, let me say that a faculty man ought not to be controlling intercollegiate athletics if he has the disposition of an evangelistic reformer. I have seen several such individuals burst upon the scene with the general attitude "Repent, ye sinners!" These people used to bother me, probably because of their implied aspersion on the sincerity of their colleagues, and also because they found so simple the problems I found so difficult. But these exhorters no longer bother

me, for I have found that their fervor does not last long. After a certain amount of braying, they fall flat on their faces, and most of them retreat to more tractable subject-matter. Others come to the realization that inspirational oratory is not the path out of the wilderness and get down to work.

A faculty man who would control athletics must not be afflicted with volatile emotions. If he has a low boiling point, particularly if he is sensitive to criticism, he will spend most of his time in a state of emotional turbulence. For he is sure to be criticized almost constantly for every real or imagined deficiency in the entire athletic program. The subjects of grievance will range from the academic standards of the university to the price of hot dogs at the stadium. Perhaps the most irritating aspect of his work will be the stream of misinformation that pours from certain sections of the press. Much reporting of sports news, as such, in the daily newspapers is accurate and well done. Occasionally, however, a news writer who fancies himself a cut above the ordinary refuses to stick to his beat, develops a column with a by-line, and sets himself up as an oracle of intercollegiate athletics. Thereafter he is under compulsion to fill his column, whether with fact or fantasy. The harm some of these people do in misleading the public is often irreparable. Even worse is the irresponsible conduct of some nationally known magazines that exploit the public's interest in athletics to build circulation.<sup>1</sup> Such practices have an impact on the sincere faculty man who is doing his best. Since many of his colleagues tend to take published distortions at face value, he is forced to do a great deal of unnecessary repair work to correct the impressions they leave. One must be ready to be criticized unjustly, and have his efforts misinterpreted, and not let it demoralize him.

The faculty athletic controller must have the courage to withstand pressure that sometimes becomes very heavy from powerful groups desiring to use the athletic program to accomplish collateral objectives in which they are interested. Intercollegiate athletics attracts tremendous public attention, and is a great vehicle for publicity. For these reasons many people seek to climb on its band wagon for their own ends. Politicians are probably the worst offenders in this respect. For example, scarcely a year goes by that does not witness some office-seeker in an area of high television-set concentration proposing legislation or other official action looking toward unrestricted telecasting of college football games. He is not interested in the welfare of intercollegiate athletics; he wants publicity, and is currying favor with the voters.

Politicians are not the only ones who do this. A few years ago a considerable amount of pressure was brought to bear on the NCAA to permit a spectacular January football game in Florida, the proceeds of which were to go for the relief of the Hungarian rebels. The emotional appeal of the cause was tremendous. But think what opening that door

<sup>1</sup>The writer could give a number of illustrations of this practice, but to do so would unduly prolong this paper. If any readers are interested, he will be glad to furnish them with examples through personal correspondence.

would mean to the future of intercollegiate athletics in view of the hundreds of worthy causes that could be pressed. The NCAA withstood the pressure, but it took considerable courage. Nor should it be overlooked that efforts to use the athletic program for collateral purposes often arise within the institution itself—in its alumni office, for instance. Those in control of the program soon develop an ability to recognize these proposals for what they are, but they must be endowed with the courage to resist such pressures. At least in state institutions, this type of situation is often very difficult to deal with.

Finally, one who takes part in controlling athletics must be prepared to devote a great deal of time and effort to the enterprise. It cannot be well done if it is given only casual and occasional attention. It takes steady and systematic work, much of it burdensome and somewhat dull. The dilettante's contribution is of no more value here than it is in most university affairs.

**I**F THERE is one thing certain, it is that no single system or mode of organizing faculty control is best, or is suitable, for all institutions. The size of the school and its faculty, its tradition of faculty activity, its faculty-student relationships, and its faculty-administration relationships are important elements to be taken into account.

Earlier it was suggested that the writer did not believe that all faculty people should necessarily have a part in controlling athletics. Yet it is easy to envision a situation in which control by the entire faculty would be a most natural and an entirely suitable way of handling the matter. This would be true, for example, if the faculty were relatively small, met regularly and frequently, and, in line with the general tradition at the college, took part in the decision of questions of college-wide significance. In sharp contrast would be the situation in a large university with a faculty of from 1,300 to 2,000. Here it seems obvious that control by the entire faculty would be out of the question. Meetings of such a group are held infrequently, and the decisions that must be made in athletic matters often require prompt action. Furthermore, meetings of such a body, regular or special, are often poorly attended. The danger would be that a small proportion of the faculty, the composition of which was largely a matter of chance, would be making the decisions. Some form of delegation of the power to decide and act is required.

It would seem advisable to delegate the function of control to a relatively small body whose sole responsibility was to handle the affairs of intercollegiate athletics. Its members ought to be selected for terms long enough to make it worth while for each to become familiar with the current status and history of the crucial problems in the field; in other words, there should be reasonable continuity of tenure. But tenure on such a body should not be indefinite, for there is also a danger of the development of a "vested interest" complex, with an accompanying rigidity of mind. Deliberate rotation of membership is desirable if it is not too rapid. New blood should be steadily introduced into the group.

The question of whether the members of the controlling body should be appointed by the president or elected by the faculty at large is a debatable one. The danger of having the president appoint the membership is that he may choose only those who represent his point of view. The danger of having the members elected by the faculty at large is that the persons chosen will be selected on the basis of mere popularity rather than suitability for the task. Perhaps a compromise between the two alternatives is possible; the faculty might nominate a panel of names from among whom the president would choose his appointees.

Whatever the method of selection, once the body is chosen it should be given full responsibility, with power to decide and to act. It ought not to be required to clear its decisions with the general faculty or any of the faculty's other operating organs. Nor should it be subject to a veto once a decision has been reached. Such devices merely disperse responsibility, impair morale, and undercut the effectiveness of faculty control. This is an area in which the principle should be followed of picking the right people for the job and then letting them go ahead and do it.

Together with this power to decide and act, however, the controlling body should have the responsibility and the duty to furnish full information to the faculty, and the members should be subject to questions at any faculty meeting regarding actions taken or contemplated. All members of the faculty should be entitled to express their views freely at faculty meetings or elsewhere on any subject having to do with athletics.

As to whether the alumni and the students should be represented on the controlling body, it is hard to generalize. In some collegiate "families," both groups have a very active interest, and it may be wise to have representation of their points of view. In any event, the membership should be so arranged that the ultimate control rests with the faculty members, who, by joining together, can outvote any other combination of interests.

Before closing this portion of the discussion, it may be pointed out that there is one way in which the faculty of a college or university can exercise powerful control of the athletic program without moving out of its academic sphere. There are three elements in this method of control. If the faculty (a) controls the standards for admission of students to the institution, (b) sets the academic standards of eligibility for competition in intercollegiate athletics, and (c) exercises complete autonomy in grading the students in their academic work, no student will ever participate in intercollegiate athletics without having the full assent of the faculty with respect to those aspects of his college life with which the faculty is most concerned and in which the faculty is most expert. He will never be admitted to the institution unless he meets the standards which the faculty has established, and thus he will come to college, not as an athlete, but as one who appears to have the mental and emotional capacity to absorb the benefits of a college education. After admission he will never participate in intercollegiate athletics unless he demon-



strates the ability to meet the academic standards of eligibility created by the faculty. Thus the faculty's independent judgment on each student, uninfluenced by the athletic coaches or the administration, will determine who is to be on the athletic squads. This is probably the most potent control that can exist.

A strong argument can be made that the faculty needs no additional control. With this power in the faculty, it is hard to see how the administration or the athletic staff could take the athletic program outside the bounds of the intellectual and educational program of the institution. The faculty can ensure that the young men on the athletic teams will establish themselves as students before they prove themselves as athletes. Perhaps this is as much control as a faculty should ask. It is the area of the faculty's primary function, and one in which it alone has the necessary expertise. When faculty members leave the academic realm and attempt to determine where new buildings should be located, how to organize the transportation of teams, or how to handle the refreshment requirements of a large crowd at a football game, they get into areas in which their competence is limited. Much can be said for the idea that such matters ought to be left in the hands of professional administrators. Any faculty that has complete, independent control of the academic life of the student body is not in the position of having a tiger by the tail. It has the athletic program under its thumb.

**F**ACULTY control of intercollegiate athletics should look toward the proper integration of the program with other aspects of the American system of higher education as its goal, since athletics will be with us for a long time to come. Those who would abolish it should heed the experience of the University of Chicago. There, it would seem, was an ideal situation for termination of the program: a private institution, well financed, not beholden to any legislature or to the public clamor, and led by the most articulate opponent of intercollegiate athletics ever to appear on the American scene. For about a decade there was no intercollegiate athletic program at Chicago. But almost as soon as Mr. Hutchins left, the task of rebuilding the intercollegiate athletic program started, and is proceeding apace. Intercollegiate athletics did not die at Chicago, nor has the Yale Bowl become an archaeological relic. Those few who would use faculty control as a means of killing intercollegiate athletics are misguided.

Competition in intercollegiate athletics can be a constructive and significant part of the educational experience of a young man who is so inclined. Kept within proper bounds, the program can promote this end. Faculty control, exercised judiciously and wisely by men of good will, is the most promising means of accomplishing the purpose. As in any human enterprise, there will always be problems and often there will be mistakes. We may take comfort, however, in the poet's thought that the Lord looks kindly on those who sin with a warm heart. With patience and a great deal of work, the difficulties can be overcome.