

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

ATHLETICS

Purdue U. Wants to Bar Professors From Betting on Its Games. Here's Why.

By Wesley Jenkins | SEPTEMBER 20, 2019

✓ PREMIUM



Icon Sportswire via AP Images

Purdue students cheer on the Boilermakers' football team at a home game this month.

After Indiana officially legalized sports betting, on September 1, faculty members on Purdue University's Athletic Affairs Committee advised the university to consider banning the faculty and staff from wagering on Boilermaker games. The faculty members feared that the new law could prevent athletes from being open and honest with their professors and advisers.

When Mitchell E. Daniels Jr., the university's president, heard the concerns, he recalled thinking: "Gee, I should have thought of that already."

He later released a statement supporting such a ban on any student, professor, or employee — "to reduce the potential for any student-athlete to feel compromised, for any implication of profiteering or inside information, or other problems."

The proposed faculty and staff ban, which will be discussed by Purdue's Board of Trustees at its October meeting, would apply to full-time, part-time, and contracted employees on all of the university system's campuses.



The Almanac of Higher Education, 2019

\$49.00

Print



ADD TO CART

With states across the country legalizing sports wagering — 42 states have passed such legislation or have it in the works — the National Collegiate Athletic Association and its member colleges are scrambling to set guidelines for who can and cannot bet. The discussion, at Purdue and elsewhere, anticipates two conflicts that could arise from legalized sports betting: instructors compromised by betting interests and athletes isolated by the new ways for others on a campus to exploit them.

The NCAA already bars athletes and anyone on an athletics staff from betting, and extends some bans to in-state relatives of such staff members. Purdue seeks to go further.

Daniels said he hopes that any policy would curtail what he sees as the two categories of potential impropriety: “inside information” and “undue influence.” In the first instance, faculty, staff, or non-athlete students could have knowledge of an athlete’s injury or

personal trouble that was not yet public. It was that scenario that led members of the Purdue faculty to express their concerns.

Faculty members said that, in many instances, students come to them about their struggles in the classroom and their personal lives. “Being a great faculty member is developing those relationships and having an open door and letting them come in,” said Tom Mitchell, associate athletics director for compliance at Purdue. “Part of the safe space is being able to say: Hey, you can tell me what’s going on. I’m not betting on your sports. I’m not betting on you, I’m not betting against you, I’m not betting against your team.”

Cheryl Cooky, chair of Purdue’s University Senate, supports the ban as a “proactive response” to sports-betting legalization.

“Purdue University is really positioning itself as a leader in terms of creating a safe space,” Cooky said. “We’re creating a value of student-athletes that does not see them primarily or solely as athletes but sees them as students first and athletes second.”

As for “undue influence,” a faculty ban could prevent a more sinister type of wagering, such as professors promising better grades in return for shaving points. John Wolohan, a professor of sports law at Syracuse University, said such a scheme was unlikely and could happen without sports wagering but is a plausible concern.

A Pandora’s Box

To draft initial versions of the proposed ban, Mitchell said Purdue looked at St. Joseph’s University’s Interim Policy on Sports Wagering but struggled to find any other colleges with similar policies. In addition to the NCAA regulations, St. Joseph’s prohibits faculty and staff members and non-athlete students from betting on the Pennsylvania university’s athletics events.

Neither Daniels nor Mitchell could say how the ban would be enforced. Mitchell called it “a cultural statement” that would be enforced only when things had gone “completely upside-down.” But Wolohan said he was concerned that such a policy could open a Pandora’s box of enforcement issues.

“Are you going to start expelling kids because they went to a casino?” Wolohan asked.

“Are you going to fire faculty because they placed a bet?”

The NCAA does not bar faculty, non-athletics staff, or non-athlete students from betting. The organization, however, has formed an ad hoc committee on sports wagering to examine potential risks in widespread legalization, with Kent Syverud, Syracuse’s chancellor, as its chairman. The panel submitted its report in August.

The committee was not asked to look into the nature of betting by faculty or non-athlete students, Syverud said, but rather to gather information about betting habits on campuses and how colleges publicize players’ availability for coming games. He added that because the existing NCAA ban on sports wagering is so extensive, those in management roles have, in theory, no exposure to the state of gambling. “It’s a bit like having only teetotalers have any oversight responsibility over the saloon,” Syverud said.

While Syverud is unfamiliar with the particulars of Purdue’s potential ban and the St. Joseph’s interim policy, he said his work on the committee had showed him how ingrained gambling on college sports already is.

“I would assume that Purdue and St. Joseph’s may be ahead of most schools in paying attention to the reality that gambling activity is deeply embedded in the culture now,” Syverud said. “Gambling behavior on college sports, as it becomes legalized, will be deeply embedded in the culture, including in the classrooms, including in the seats in the stadiums, and they’re concerned about the incentives that creates.”

Purdue’s potential ban is just an idea at the moment, with more questions than answers, Daniels said. But despite already playing catch-up to the new legislation, Purdue is ahead of the curve by even considering the issue’s ramifications.

“On the one hand, I sort of kick myself that I didn’t ask this question at least some time back,” Daniels said. “On the other hand, as soon as we did, I started hearing from people saying: Oh yeah, this could be a real problem. I think this is something we’re all just beginning to come to grips with.”

Wesley Jenkins is an editorial intern at The Chronicle. Follow him on Twitter @_wesjenks, or email him at wjenkins@chronicle.com.

© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037