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SPORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND "THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY"

Keith Abney

I. The Telos of the University

Defensible, clearly articulated goals are important for all institutions, and none more so than universities. Actions taken in the absence of transparently defined goals are often counterproductive. Assessment in the absence of goals appears impossible—how can we measure achievement without knowing what we are trying to achieve? The disease of the current state of the university is in large part a result of confusion and culpable ignorance concerning its goals. Hence, solving the problems of a university begin with defining the goals or purposes of a university. So, what constitutes the telos¹ of a university?

Any attempt to make explicit the implicit goals of a university may reveal nothing more than the confusing, conflicting welter of the incompatible and ill-articulated goals of its various constituencies. Accordingly, we need a model for understanding the university as a whole in order to fathom its purposes properly. One recent theme is to envision the university as a type of business, with students as customers and faculty as employees producing a product for sale. But this model creates severe difficulties in understanding what the goals of universities—especially public universities—ought to be, for neither tradition nor law treats the university as a for-profit institution.

There are many respects in which assuming the corporate model of the university affects the explicit language and even more the interpersonal social "texture" of disputes about goals and achievement within the university. For instance, the business model can

affect the relative valuing of advancement within one's profession (i.e., research) versus service to the institution (i.e., teaching and committee work) in the bottom line form of requiring the achievement of grants as a requirement for tenure, or of a university owning the intellectual property of its workers, or teaching X number of students in order to meet income goals, and so on. But the issue that most dramatically illustrates the reality—and the perils—of the “corporate” university is in an area originally presumed tangential to its mission—the extracurricular activity called intercollegiate sports. These have grown from an occasional 19th century contest for local bragging rights to a 21st century multibillion-dollar business.²

Let me be clear from the outset: I maintain that to understand the university as just another business, and collegiate sport as merely an economic issue, fundamentally distorts the proper telos of a university. If universities should exist to question the established order and conduce to human flourishing, then they need to be isolated from market pressures that undermine such attempts. Indeed, whereas faculty may now no longer fear Big Brother's direct subjugation of their free speech, they instead often tailor their research and community participation so as not to offend their chances of garnering a livelihood.³ Unlike any free market business, the traditional concept of a university does not include a specific product or service to sell, unless truth is a product and enlightenment is a service. Do we really want professors and coaches and other university employees to become marketers? Given the corporate model, soon such a question will become moot—it will be taken for granted. And certainly part of the purpose of universities is to take no such questions for granted—especially about the material conditions of their own existence.

Indeed, to think of the university as a market-driven enterprise, in which the customer is always right, is to give up on the very idea that people come to these places to learn, not merely be reinforced or manipulated in their preexisting desires and inclinations. Try, terrifyingly, to imagine a university in which the goal is to have each student walk away from each class and extracurricular activity a satisfied consumer, subject to the usual methods of market manipulation. Does advertising normally challenge one to think long and hard about a product's claims, to develop tools of critical assessment, to better oneself? Indeed not: business knows that the first goal of sales is often to dumb down the consumer's critical mentality, so as to make the customers happy with whatever they receive, and to desire something for the positive associations it brings, rather than because it is good for one. A rejection of such a marketing mentality and reaffirmation of the traditional concept of the university remains viable among the professorate, albeit under siege. But the current state of intercollegiate athletics threatens, like the canary in the coal mine, to adumbrate its sordid venality into a future for the university as a whole.

II. *What Role for Sport?*

How then to critique and understand the proper role for sport to play in the modern university? To come to grips with what role it should have, we begin by asking, "What role does it have now?" As an example, here are some typical headlines from the leading sports site on the web, ESPN.com:⁴

NCB Headlines Wednesday, September 24, 2003

- Tuesday roundup: Minnesota promotes aide
- Utah hires Abatemarco as assistant
- Clemons' coursework for BYU under review
- Cleveland State cuts senior scoring leader
- Sources: Reebok close to signing Vaccaro

These headlines all involve the confluence of athletics, academic non-achievement and cheating, and the dominant theme throughout them all—money. They comprise a litany of typical themes: A coach is hired or promoted to a higher salary—higher than most instructors at the school; a student has coursework created by another person or graded differently than the work of other students, undermining the integrity of the institution's educational mission; a student who is no longer performing up to the coach's standards is deprived of a scholarship and told to go elsewhere. Further, these headlines demonstrate that business does not merely provide an ethos in which money determines values, but rather invades the university's workings directly—as when a longtime shoe company representative is hired by a competitor, in the wars over earning the rights to market shoes to teenagers using coaches and their dictatorial control over "their" teenagers, which makes the shoe companies and their reps and the coaches rich, while the college athletes see nary a dime.⁵

Of course, these headlines are simply from one unexceptional day in the life of big time intercollegiate athletics. In these past few months, headlines also feature star running back Maurice Claret of Ohio State (last year's college football champs) lying to police about benefits and stolen property and receiving special treatment in test-taking;⁶ and even more egregiously, Dave Bliss, the Baylor basketball coach, telling his players and assistants to lie to police and other authorities and impugn the reputation of a player shot dead—allegedly by a teammate—by falsely alleging he was a drug dealer. Why would Bliss do such a horrible, slanderous thing? Well, in order to avoid the public and the NCAA becoming aware of multiple violations of NCAA rules by his program.⁷

At Cal Poly, this effect is somewhat muted, for the football team, at least in the national consciousness, remains best known for a plane crash that still causes legendary coach and announcer John Madden to refuse to fly. Instead, he rides a bus (the "Mad-

dencruiser”) to every game.⁸ Such outrages are only for Division I-A schools, are they not?

No. The pressure on Cal Poly can be elucidated by an analogy: Imagine another school dominated by its engineering and agriculture and architecture programs, also in a small city surrounded by a rural area, but with a very different national profile from Cal Poly’s. Call it “Auburn University.” Well, what’s the difference between Auburn and Cal Poly, besides Alabama versus California? Sport. Football and basketball, to be more precise—but especially football. Auburn offers an instructive case study on how money and PR and rankings come to dominate the goals of a university and subvert its very nature.

III. Sport at Auburn University

This story begins in 1993, when Auburn hired Terry Bowden as its new head football coach. He is the son of coaching legend Bobby Bowden of Florida State University, a school called “Free Shoes University” by rival Steve Spurrier after one of its many scandals.⁹ Auburn was on probation during Bowden’s first season, but he led it to an undefeated campaign and raised expectations among the Auburn faithful—those hordes who wearied each year of being Alabama’s whipping boy. Soon after, an ambitious new president, William Muse, was appointed, with plans to make Auburn into a first-tier research university. But despite his hope that Auburn implement the academic improvements mandated by its own “21st Century Commission” study,¹⁰ the state legislature and trustees did not approve additional academic funding; instead, funding for academic programs remained as if in crisis mode, despite a booming national and state economy in the mid to late-1990s. The key trustee, Bobby Lowder, simply (and routinely) referred to as “Satan” by Muse’s family,¹¹ had temporarily lost his position before Muse was hired; however, he managed to “persuade” the Alabama State Supreme Court to allow his continuance as trustee despite written term limitations, and in convoluted legal and institutional battles waged war against the modernizers, eventually forcing out university president Muse as part of his coup. Lowder allegedly also made sure, in the midst of critical funding shortfalls, that one part of the university remained amply funded—the football team.¹²

How well funded? In addition to the official budget largesse handed out to football operations, Bowden told three senior faculty members that football players were being paid when he arrived as coach.¹³ In becoming known, these allegations might have violated an agreement Bowden made with Auburn, signed on May 17, 2002, which stated that he knew of no NCAA violations at Auburn while he was coach during 1993-98; further, he agreed to repay \$620,000 to Auburn if he made such accusations, in public or private. It was the last of three pacts between Auburn and Bowden, all made after his

abrupt and surprising resignation/dismissal in the midst of the 1998 season—surprising only until it became known he had a falling-out with Lowder, the real power behind every decision.¹⁴

In the first legal agreement, in 1999, Bowden promised not to say anything negative about Auburn. In a reworking of the agreement in 2000, that clause was removed. But in the 2002 agreement, a similar clause was reinstated. Prior to the final version of the agreement, Bowden, speaking on a tape that was recorded in 2001, said boosters were funneling thousands of dollars to football players when he became coach in 1993. The Tigers were on probation for previous infractions when he took over, and Bowden claims that he eventually stopped the payments.¹⁵ Former athletic director Mike Lude and four Auburn professors also assert that Bowden told them in 2001 of a pay-for-play scheme by boosters and Auburn football staff when he became coach.¹⁶ Bowden, now a college football commentator for ABC, refused comment on the pay-for-play reports.

Even though these allegations are several years old, they could still hurt the program: There is a four-year statute of limitations for NCAA violations, but there is an exception if the infraction is considered “blatant.”¹⁷ Ex-president Muse has said (in recently released transcripts) that he had heard rumors of a pay-for-play scheme, but the NCAA investigation did not confirm it. Muse had heard that there was a network of alums who each had agreed to provide *X* number of dollars per year for a particular player and that there was a book that listed all of these individuals and the amounts that they paid. There was even a rumor that, at one time, [an assistant coach] was the keeper of the book. In fact, after he left Auburn, Terry even told me that. But that has never been verified. In the NCAA investigation, there didn’t turn out to be any evidence of that.¹⁸

To summarize: In the midst of a publicized budget crisis, Auburn’s trustees and football administrators admittedly broke NCAA rules and shuttled funds to its football players while simultaneously denying them to its faculty and other students, all while lying about it, lying even to the university president. So, what exactly does all this mean for Auburn?

Sadly, probably very little. For most colleges, their public image is intimately connected with an aspect supposedly foreign to their mission: namely, their athletic teams, and in particular the success of those teams. How much does the general public—or for that matter, a faculty member at Cal Poly, even a reader of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—actually know about the engineering or aerospace or architecture departments of Auburn University—or for that matter, the details of the alleged bribery, judicial misconduct, false statements to faculty, and assorted other mendacities that characterize the whole affair? Almost assuredly, very little, which is why all this likely comes as news to you, dear readers. But how many of you know that in the summer of 2003, Auburn’s football team was picked #1 in the preseason by *The Sporting News*¹⁹, but they lost their

first two games and so were seen as massive disappointments, at least before a recent winning streak? However, blood rival Alabama is far worse off—on probation and losing games—and has an inexperienced new coach after an embarrassing summer of their own.²⁰ Such comparisons provoke the public perception that Auburn University is doing very well, thank you very much.

Does that mean anything for the rest of the university? You bet it does. It means that to have a successful season, they'd better win the SEC West—and stay off probation. That is, don't get caught—or if you do, make sure more than 4 years have gone by. And then all will be well with Auburn, at least in the public eye. In dollars and (non)cents, donations and applications increase as the team rises in the polls. But the university, behind the scenes, is not doing well at all. Beware, those who would emulate it.

IV. The Solution: Virtue Ethics for the Non-profit University

If universities are emphatically not merely for-profit businesses with a product or service to sell and profit enhancement as their prime motive, we need a better model in order to ascertain the proper goals of a university and how to rationally go about reforming them. I suggest a conscious goal of modeling the public university after organizations in the not-for-profit sector of our society. I say consciously, because reforms in the absence of explicit goals remain doomed. Indeed, goals still exist, but they are the implicit goals of various parties with institutional power, with various agendas.

The result: consensus about the proper changes to make remains difficult or impossible to obtain. Most importantly, these subunits of a university do not necessarily share one crucial goal: what is best for the university and the larger community as a whole. Endless squabbling over the process or means of change is the result when the root of the problem lies in the tacit disagreement over the goals of the institution, and hence the nature of the ends of the university—of determining what exactly constitutes the point of desired changes.

One element of a not-for-profit vision, hopefully, is obvious: intercollegiate athletics has become the dominant public face of most universities, and the single most important way for the vast majority to make or break their reputations. Does that mean sports should be run as a for-profit business, with athletes as hired mercenaries, paid to bring glory to dear alma mater? If so, what ultimate message does this send? I maintain that institutions of higher learning do not exist merely to teach a skill for profit, but rather operate to make their communities better places, to bring wisdom into the world through both information and communally lived experiences. Hence, to understand the purpose of the university is (at least in part) to envision it as a non-profit institution whose goal is to provide services to the relevant community. Success or failure of the

entire university, including its sports teams, will be judged on the ability to provide the relevant services and experiences, not on increasing the bottom line.

This is hardly to say that non-profit organizations operate without budgets or any regard for spending—very much the opposite. But they spend their money and create their budgets and raise their funds in conscious appraisal of how that relates to their overall goals as an organization, rather than simply doing so in a way that best maximizes the cash flow into the institutional coffers. As a result, we need to further specify those services which universities provide in order to better understand, with utmost clarity, the proper goals for the university. The tensions between instruction, research, and intercollegiate athletics will provide a glimpse into the hard choices a university must make as it seeks to define itself.

The practical outcome of my proposal for the major sports: if the NBA and NFL want to have colleges serve as minor leagues, then those professional leagues should directly pay college players as part of their “stay in school” program, putting their money where their PR mouths are. Much as MLB finances the minor leagues, the NBA and NFL could finance the athletic teams of all colleges who play big-time minor league (college) sports, offering each a financial incentive to avoid the rush into the highest league. Colleges should also treat their athletes like every other student, while avoiding the graft and corruption of making athletics a separate entity, differently administered than the rest of the university. No special tutoring, class exemptions, special privileges, and so forth for athletes; no special contracts for coaches or other athletic department employees at odds with faculty and staff collective bargaining; and surely, at least allow the athletes, like other students, to profit from their own fame and success—to sell their own jerseys, license apparel, do promos, and so on.

These solutions depend upon recognizing the problem(s), of course. More solutions yet are available once the proper goals are clearly articulated and agreed upon. The fundamental problem remains that the university defines its athletic teams increasingly in terms of customers and products, and acts to ensure sales and profits; it views student athletes as simple tools, merely disposable means towards the goal of profit. Non-profit institutions, on the other hand, value a process, not a product, and exist for the public well-being, not the pursuit of material gain. Such institutions are supposed to teach and exemplify what contemporary business too often negates: a view of human beings as having intrinsic worth and dignity (and each individual as important in her or his own self) rather than deriving all their worth through their economic role.

Ironically, in a post-Communist age, the goal of reducing all human values to economic values has never been more pronounced. This goal remains the antithesis of the proper purpose of a university. So inasmuch as universities emulate businesses, their goals will become shallow and even ridiculous (especially from an economic perspec-

tive), and the *raison d'être* of the university shall self-destruct. Universities that make themselves into minor-league businesses will eventually go the way of minor league teams—bankruptcy and irrelevance, as other entities will slowly emerge to inculcate the virtues of a flourishing existence. When instruction becomes advertising and questions a form of indoctrination, and sport just another tool for advertising that business, then academia will be long into its twilight—and shall deserve to pass away. 

Notes

1. The Greek term for a goal or purpose is particularly apropos here, as I examine the moral consequences of university's (in)ability to "know itself." This paragraph and several others contain excerpts and adaptations of my previous work for the *Auburn Horizon*, with archives located at http://www.auburn.edu/administration/horizon/oldies_horizon.html.
2. The CBS TV contract for televising the men's basketball tourney alone guarantees the NCAA over \$6 billion through 2014. (See the CNN financial story at <http://money.cnn.com/1999/11/18/news/ncaa/>.) Football is even more lucrative, to say nothing of the various other "minor" sports.
3. The case of David Bohm, who only after exile developed an alternative to the Copenhagen version of quantum mechanics, serves as a warning; see "David Bohm, his science and his exile," by Olival Freire Jr. at <http://albinoni.brera.unimi.it/MilanWorkshop2003/Freire>.
4. From the headline summary at <http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/index>, on September 24, 2003.
5. For an example, see the 1998 story "Shoe makers have young stars toeing the line of amateurism," by Mike Stewart of *The Juneau Empire* on Duke recruit (and now NBA player) Carlos Boozer at http://www.juneaualaska.com/Boozer/booz_1998_9.shtml.
6. The TA reporting Claret's special treatment has become the object of public ridicule: see the October 7, 2003 story "Just pay them to be athletes and forget about the rest" by Tom Farrey at <http://espn.go.com/ncaa/s/2003/1006/1632215.html>. Meanwhile, his court case on the other charges remains pending at this time: see "Judge will decide on NCAA discoveries," the AP story of October 20, 2003 at <http://sports.espn.go.com/ncf/news/story?id=1642300>.
7. As usual, the whistleblower later lost his job: see "Baylor assistant who taped Bliss is out," from the AP, August 28, 2003 at <http://sports.espn.go.com/ncb/news/story?id=1605393>.
8. See "Part 2: A Madden in Full" by Pat Toomay about this incident in the context of Madden's career at <http://espn.go.com/page2/s/toomay/021114.html>.
9. For the depth of that rivalry, see the November 26, 2001 "Spurrier Misses the Point, Even If He Has One," by Gene Wojciechowski of *ESPN: The Magazine*, at http://espn.go.com/magazine/geno_20011125.html.
10. A document (see <http://www.ag.auburn.edu/commission/>) outlining Auburn's goals for the coming century; like most such documents, adhered to in principle but not in practice.
11. Personal communication.
12. Personal communication.
13. See a précis of the 9-18-03 story, titled "Bowden's story backed up by Auburn faculty" from the AP at <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2003/football/ncaa/09/18/bc.fbc.bowden.auburn.ap/>. A longer and more detailed version of these events is found in the September 25, 2003 *Auburn Plainsman*, the school paper, in an article by Gabe Carpenter entitled "Transcripts revive rumors of pay for players," found at <http://www.theplainsman.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2003/09/25/3f725d8217458?template=pda>.

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14. See Carpenter's September 25, 2003 *Auburn Plainsman* article at <http://www.theplainsman.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2003/09/25/3f725d8217458?template=pda> for details.
15. See "Bowden may have violated agreement with comments" by John Zenor, *AP Sports Writer*, September 22, 2003, at <http://sports.yahoo.com/ncaaf/news?slug=ap-bowden-auburn&prov=ap&type=lgns>.
16. Again, see Carpenter's September 25, 2003 *Auburn Plainsman* article at <http://www.theplainsman.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2003/09/25/3f725d8217458?template=pda> for details.
17. See "Bowden told others" by the AP, 9-19-03, at <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/mld/enquirer/2003/09/19/sports/6806820.htm>.
18. See "Bowden Said Boosters Paid Auburn Players", John Zenor, *AP Sports Writer*, September 16, 2003, at <http://www.collegesports.com/sports/m-footbl/stories/091603abw.html>.
19. For a proud display of such faulty prognostication, see http://www.auburntigers.com/football/page.cfm?doc_id=4338.
20. For this tawdry tale, see "Price Fired as Alabama Football Coach" by Kelly Whiteside, *USA Today*, May 3, 2003, at http://www.usatoday.com/sports/college/football/sec/2003-05-03-price-fired_x.htm.