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Excerpt
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PART ONE

COMMERCIAL SPORTS AS A UNIVERSITY FUNCTION

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ONE

Strange Bedfellows

Two starkly different worlds coexist today within American higher education. One is the traditional academic world that conforms to the succinct statement offered by economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz: “The business of colleges and universities is the creation and diffusion of knowledge.”¹ Because American research universities have excelled in these functions, today they enjoy global preeminence. Yet there is another world within American universities, just as firmly rooted, that bears no obvious relation to the first. It is the world of big-time college sports, a form of entertainment that has over the course of a century enmeshed itself in the American higher education scene, becoming part of the popular conception of the “collegiate” experience.

To appreciate the gulf that divides these two worlds, it is instructive to visit the campus of a university that has a big-time sports program. Let us take a quick virtual tour of one of these – the sprawling campus of the University of Texas in Austin. It will be sufficient for our purposes to visit just two buildings on that campus.

The first stop on our tour is a five-story building that is home to the Center for Nano- and Molecular Science and Technology. This brick and concrete building houses offices, equipment, and laboratories used by scientists and engineers. The professors affiliated with this center come from departments like chemistry and biochemistry, physics, biomedical engineering, chemical engineering, electrical and computer engineering, and mechanical engineering. Some of these departments rank among the country’s highest rated in their respective disciplines.² Together with

¹ Goldin and Katz (1999, p. 38).

² Information on rankings of graduate programs at the University of Texas is presented on the web page of the university’s graduate school. It reports that more than forty of the

postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and other technical staff, some of whom have come to the United States from abroad, these faculty members carry out research projects related to fields like nanoelectronics, nanobiology and nanomedicine, nanoparticle synthesis, and nanomechanics. Their research articles appear in such scholarly publications as *Biochemistry and Bioengineering*, *Inorganic Chemistry*, *Journal of Physical Chemistry*, *Nature*, *Polymer*, and *Science*. This research has the potential to contribute to such practical advances as better fuel cells and improved therapies for combating human neurodegenerative diseases.

The highly technical research and advanced training that take place in this building exemplify the essential work of research universities – the creation and diffusion of knowledge. Indeed, the center’s activities seem to embody perfectly the university’s published mission statement:

The mission of The University of Texas at Austin is to achieve excellence in the interrelated areas of undergraduate education, graduate education, research and public service. The university provides superior and comprehensive educational opportunities at the baccalaureate through doctoral and special professional educational levels.

The university contributes to the advancement of society through research, creative activity, scholarly inquiry and the development of new knowledge. The university preserves and promotes the arts, benefits the state’s economy, serves the citizens through public programs and provides other public service.³

The University of Texas is by no means unique in its devotion to research and teaching. American research universities like it are magnets for the world’s best graduate students because they are home to a large share of the world’s leading research faculty and doctoral programs. American universities occupy an enviable position of preeminence among the world’s research universities, a fact confirmed by global rankings. For example, according to the rankings produced by the *Times* of London, more than half of the world’s top fifty universities are located in the United States. The rankings introduced by Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University, a ranking heavily weighted toward scientific research output, lists thirty-one American universities in its top fifty. The University of Texas appeared on both lists.⁴ In short, the Center for Nano- and Molecular Science and

universities and disciplines were ranked among the top ten in the country. <https://gradschool.utexas.edu/about-us/why-ut-austin/rankings>, 8/17/17.

³ <https://www.utexas.edu/about/mission-and-values>, 8/15/17.

⁴ The *Times* of London’s 2017 ranking, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/reputation-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats, 8/15/17. The ShanghaiRanking Consultancy ranking, formerly

Technology at Texas admirably symbolizes the academic purpose of American universities.

The second stop on our virtual tour of the University of Texas, just a ten-minute walk away, takes us to a realm that is strikingly different from the world of research and teaching. This stop is the university's football stadium, named the Darrell K. Royal–Texas Memorial Stadium. This structure, featuring double decks on one side, can accommodate slightly more than a 100,000 spectators, and it was filled to 97 percent of its capacity at all but one of its six home games during the 2016 season.⁵ At two ends of the stadium are towers, eight and nine stories high, that house luxury suites outfitted with theater-style seats, televisions, kitchenettes, and bars, and are available for lease at rates up to \$88,000 a year. The university's football team, which has played in postseason bowls in four of the previous six years, rides to practice every day during the season aboard chartered buses and dresses in a locker room equipped with five flat-screen TVs and adorned with a twenty-foot ceiling light in the shape of a longhorn. A professor in the business school characterized the university's sports facilities as "beyond opulence."⁶ The team's coach, whose name elicited more than three times the number of Google hits as that of the university's president, was in 2016 paid six times as much. Football games and commentary are broadcast over a network of thirty-six radio stations (two in Spanish) from El Paso to Corpus Christi over the Longhorn IMG Radio Network.⁷ The university also boasts its own television network. Produced in partnership with ESPN, the Longhorn Network broadcasts some 175 sporting events a year, including several football games.⁸ The athletic department's website listed more than 400 hundred staff members, which included the head football coach and his fourteen assistant coaches, coaches for the other fourteen varsity teams, the associated trainers and facilities managers, and those who specialize in such related functions as communications, fan engagement, fund-raising, suite operations, ticket sales, academic support services, and risk management.⁹ Those who

produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Center for World-Class Universities, for 2016 is shown in Appendix Table A1.1.

⁵ The stadium's official capacity is 100,119; <http://www.foxsports.com/southwest/gallery/the-20-largest-stadiums-in-college-football-090814>; http://www.espn.com/college-football/team/stadium/_id/251, both accessed 8/13/17.

⁶ Eric Dexheimer, "The Longhorn Economy," *American-Statesman*, September 30, 2007.

⁷ http://www.texassports.com/sports/2013/7/27/sponsor_0727135359.aspx#football, 8/17/17.

⁸ <http://www.espn.com/longhornnetwork/about>, 8/17/17.

⁹ In 2017 the athletics staff directory listed 439 individuals. http://www.texassports.com/sports/2013/7/29/GEN_0729135557.aspx, 8/26/17.

count themselves Texas football fans are legion, spread throughout the state and beyond, by no means restricted to those with a college education.

The worlds represented by these two buildings at the University of Texas are astonishingly different. Not surprisingly, they occupy different parts of the university's organizational chart. One of them is under the jurisdiction of the university's academic enterprise, and the other is under the control of the athletic enterprise. The nanoscience center, on the academic side of the university, exemplifies the rarefied, rational realm that has traditionally been associated with the academic world. Although this academic realm is by no means innocent of the commercial world, it is largely divorced from calculations of profit and loss. Facts, reason, and beauty are its raw materials; analysis, study, and free expression are its modes of operation.

By contrast, the stadium and those who work there represent a world that is unashamedly commercial and thoroughly popular, even populist. This part of the university is quite literally a portion of the country's entertainment industry. It sells its brand of performance in the commercial marketplace, depending for revenue on both paying customers and media. Perhaps its most obvious distinguishing feature is that its normal operations – as a matter of course – are visible to an extent unmatched by anything that happens on the academic side. Even ignoring the television cameras, just the gathering of a 100,000 individuals in one location is enough to mark an event as out of the ordinary. It has been said that many American universities are best known across the country, if at all, not for their academic programs, but for their football teams, and this remark is as true today as it was when it was first written, more than thirty years ago.¹⁰

But even setting national recognition aside for the moment and viewing the big-time sports enterprise merely as one organizational unit inside a university, it still stands apart. On any campus with a big-time athletics program, the football and basketball schedules quite simply rule the university's calendar. What other department or school in the university holds the power, merely through its regular operation, to bring the rest of the institution to a halt? What other unit's scheduled activities are so influential that every other department, all the way up to the president's office, makes sure not to schedule any meeting or event that would conflict? To anyone who grew up in the United States or who has spent much time around a university with a big-time sports program, none of this will

¹⁰ Toma (2003); Angell (1928, p. 119): "Intercollegiate athletics are the feature of our universities best known to the American public."

come as a surprise. Both the coexistence of these two disparate realms and the sway of athletics are such familiar traits of the American higher education scene that they are simply taken for granted.¹¹ Were it not so familiar, the contrast between these two worlds would surely be cause for wonder.

Here is an authentic case of American exceptionalism: in no other large country in the world is commercialized athletic competition so closely tied to institutions of higher education. To be sure, universities in Europe, Asia, Canada, and elsewhere frequently sponsor “club” teams that compete against each other in a variety of sports, ranging from squash and ice hockey to basketball and badminton. The oldest organized intercollegiate competition still going is the annual Boat Race, which has for more than 150 years pitted against each other crews from the two great British universities, Oxford and Cambridge. But none of these forms of university-affiliated athletic competition generates the revenue or rises to the level of commercial sophistication of American intercollegiate athletics. Only in the United States has there grown up such an elaborate system of publicized and commercialized sports contests involving university-sponsored teams. Although most of the teams sponsored by the 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States are no more famous or commercial than university teams in other countries, the football and basketball teams representing several hundred universities achieve such high levels of revenue and visibility that their universities in effect become part of the American entertainment industry. This is big-time college sports.

THE EUROPEAN VISITOR'S NAIVE QUESTION

Although this peculiarly American activity may be second nature to most Americans and thus considered unremarkable, one can only imagine how odd it must appear to a visitor from abroad, whose experience with universities has never included an entertainment spectacle of this order that is put on by universities themselves. This is precisely the hypothetical situation imagined back in 1929 by Henry Pritchett, then president of the

¹¹ Only a few people objected, for example, when the University of North Carolina sent its employees home early, without pay, on a weekday when an evening football game threatened to cause a traffic jam. “Major Inconvenience,” *Daily Tar Heel*, September 3, 2009. By 2017 weeknight games had become commonplace at universities with big-time football programs, thanks to television contracts with conferences and the seemingly unquenchable demand for games. Consequently, such games ceased to be an issue arousing public protest of any sort.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, when he included the following in his preface to the foundation's lengthy study of college athletics:

Nothing in the educational regime of our higher institutions perplexes the European visitor so much as the role that organized athletics play. On a crisp November afternoon he finds many thousands of men and women, gathered in a great amphitheater, wildly cheering a group of athletes who are described to him as playing a game of football. . . .

When the visitor from the European university has pondered the matter, he comes to his American university colleagues with two questions:

"What relation has this astonishing athletic display to the work of an intellectual agency like a university?"

"How do students, devoted to study, find either the time or the money to stage so costly a performance?"¹²

Pritchett's imagined visitor can easily discover the answer to the second question: it is the university, not the students, that stages the performance. It is the first of these questions, concerning the fundamental purpose of the athletic enterprise, that is the truly perplexing one. And it is as deserving of careful consideration today as it was in 1929. Why do universities engage in this activity? This gaudy, wildly popular form of entertainment has no obvious connection to the intellectual work of universities other than the name on the uniforms. Yet big-time college athletics has over the course of a century become woven into the fabric of many American universities. So the visitor's question remains both pertinent and challenging, and it inspires other ones. Why is the enterprise of big-time sports a part of the operation of contemporary American universities? What are the consequences for the universities that undertake it? What, if anything, needs to be done about it? These are the questions that motivate this book.

To explain the existence of big-time college sports, university leaders and outside observers usually offer one of several justifications. First among them is the educational argument: beginning with the ancient Greeks, athletic pursuits have been recognized as a valuable component of a complete education. Through both training and competition, the athlete learns life lessons taught nowhere better than on the field of play. As Harvard president Charles Eliot argued before the twentieth century, athletic participation develops such "qualities as courage, fortitude, and

¹² Pritchett (1929, p. vi).

presence of mind in emergencies and under difficulties” as well as cooperation and, for some, the “habit of command.”¹³ While this explanation continues to have real force when applied to students’ participation in the variety of sports offered on college campuses, it does little to justify the big-time athletic operation, since college students participate in big-time college sports primarily as spectators. Relatively few of them enjoy the moral and physical benefits of participating in these sports. And for those who do play one of the revenue sports, as we will see, participation often takes on the quality of employment more than that of recreation. Despite their official amateur status, their role begins to morph into one that has many of the markings of a professional player, though certainly without the professional’s monetary compensation.

A second common justification for big-time athletic operations is the one that might be the first to occur to many outside observers: money. At least in the public perception, the highly visible football and basketball programs run by universities would appear to be a ready source of income, given the large figures commonly reported for such items as football bowl receipts and coaches’ salaries. Indeed, the head basketball coach for the University of Connecticut defended his \$1.6 million salary at a time when the Connecticut state government was running a large deficit, telling a reporter that his basketball program brought in \$12 million a year.¹⁴ Although some big-time basketball and football programs might well turn a profit if run by themselves, universities typically consolidate all their intercollegiate sports under one department, with one budget. And most of these departments lose money, including the one operated by the University of Connecticut. As we will see, however, calculating profit or loss for these departments is not without its complexities and ambiguities.

A third argument that universities sometimes use to justify their investment in commercialized spectator sports is that athletic acclaim begets public attention for the university’s academic mission, which in turn pays off in quite tangible ways. Chief among the benefits thought to result from heightened visibility is a boost in applications for admission. Whether it is a Cinderella team’s surprising success in the NCAA basketball tournament

¹³ Eliot (1894, p. 19). For a contemporary exposition of the same virtues, see Arne Duncan, “Building a Better Front Porch for Higher Education” (excerpts of remarks to the NCAA, January 14, 2010), <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/building-better-front-porch-higher-education%E2%80%944excerpts-secretary-arne-duncans-remarks>, 6/7/10.

¹⁴ Actually, revenue generated by the university’s basketball program was only about half that amount. Joe Nocera, “Jim Calhoun Defends His Salary,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2009.

or the widespread recognition that comes from being a perennial football powerhouse, admissions directors believe that athletic prominence generates student applications. But the hoped-for benefits go beyond generating a stronger pool of applicants. Athletic success, and the notoriety it brings, is believed also to generate more donations, as already noted, and stronger support from state and local governments. Buoyed by the apparent success of newly ascendant big-time football programs at institutions like the University of Connecticut, Rutgers, the University of South Florida, and Boise State, other universities, among them Georgia State and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, have announced in recent years their intention to launch football programs of their own.¹⁵

One more standard justification for big-time athletics is the idea that mass allegiance can help to build the bonds of community on a campus. Having a team to root for has a feel-good effect on students that can build valuable social capital while they attend and continue into later years as alumni. One administrator wrote, “Sports teams can foster a deep sense of community and social solidarity, even when those teams lose more often than they win.”¹⁶ Since the vast majority of students become involved in big-time sports, if at all, as spectators rather than as players, this justification also invites careful consideration.

These four justifications make up the conventional answer to the foreign visitor’s question. Together they say that America’s unique form of university-sponsored commercial sports bolsters the academic mission of the universities that have chosen to engage in this enterprise. Some historians have argued that American colleges latched onto sports in the first place as a way to garner the attention and resources they needed to survive in the country’s decentralized, competitive marketplace, and these justifications are consistent with that argument. Is it a coincidence that the country whose universities are recognized as global leaders is the only one whose universities sponsor commercial sports on a grand scale?

THE CASE AGAINST BIG-TIME COLLEGE ATHLETICS

Despite these purported benefits, the college sports enterprise has long been a target of vigorous criticism. From the earliest days of intercollegiate competition in rugby, boat racing, baseball, and football, beginning well

¹⁵ See, e.g., Lynn Zinser, “A Revived Program and an Altered State at Rutgers,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2007.

¹⁶ Gary A. Olson, “Should We Ditch Football?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 5, 2010.