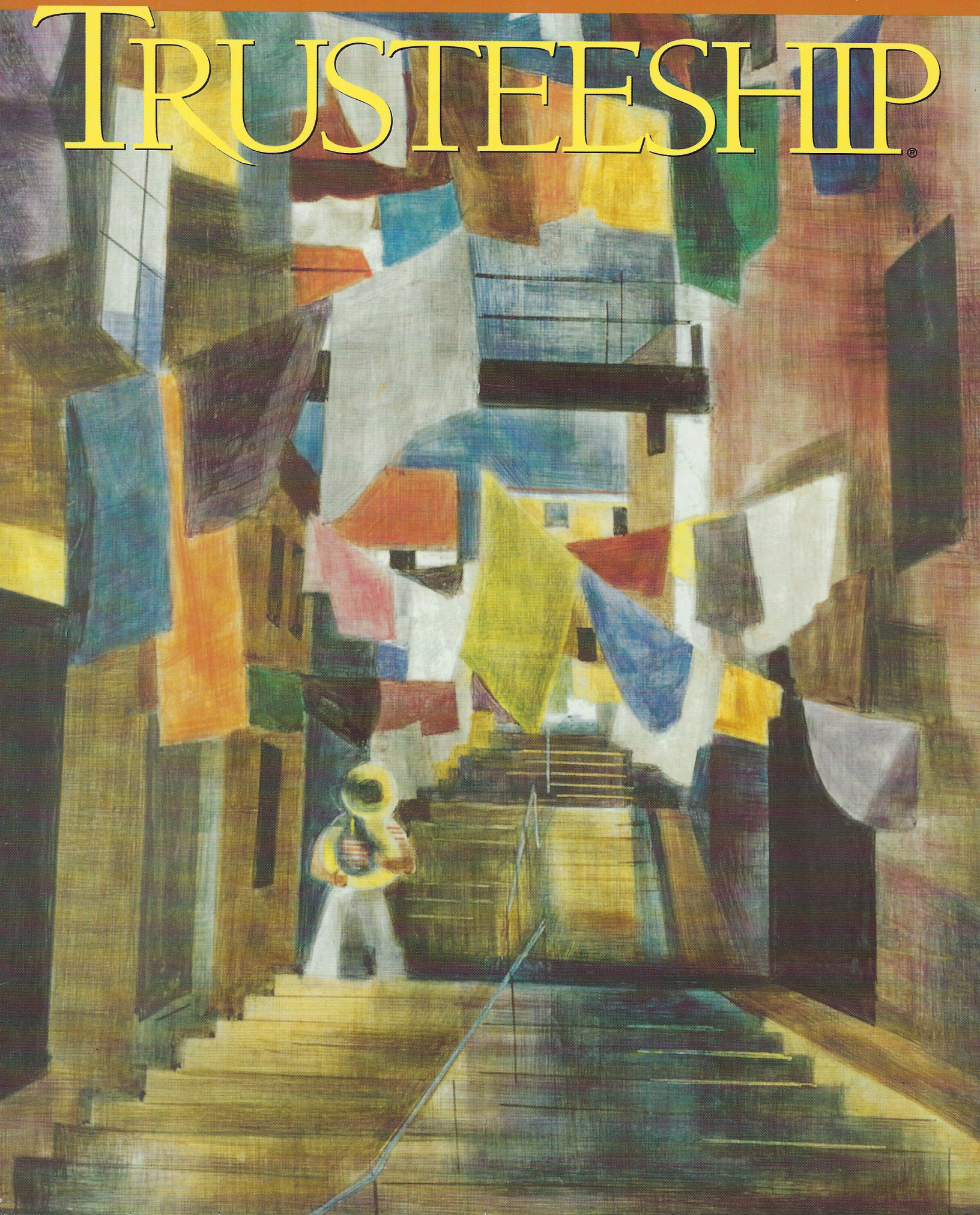


THE ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

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# TRUSTEESHIP<sup>®</sup>



# TRUSTEESHIP

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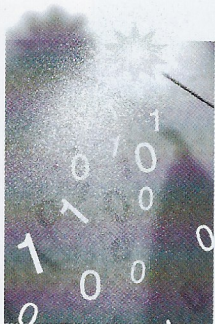
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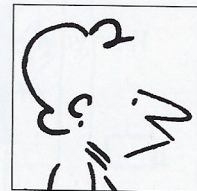
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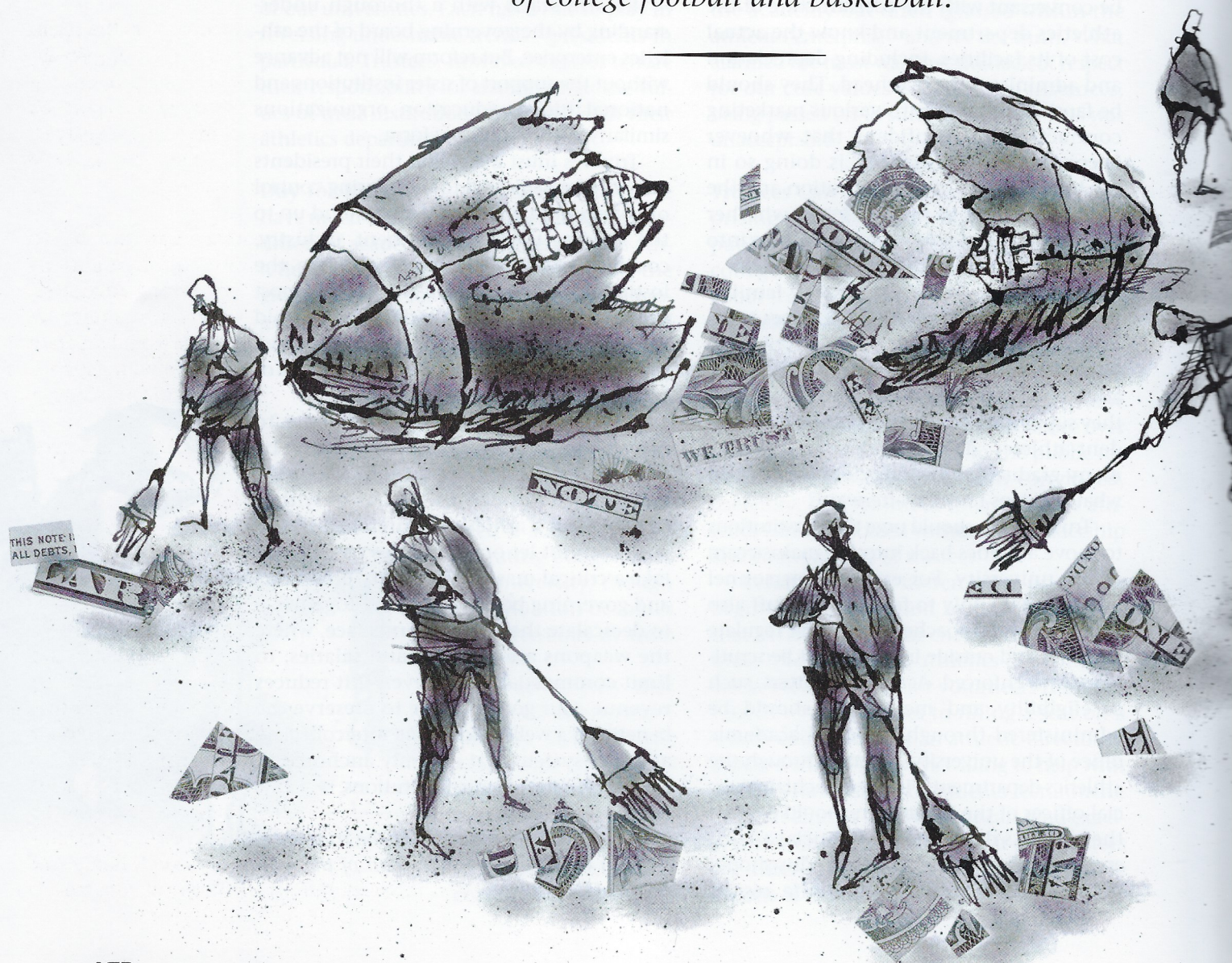
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**ACADEMICS FIRST:**

# Rejuvenating Athletics Reform

*Division I-A presidents can work together and through their athletics conferences to stem the professionalization of college football and basketball.*



## **T**HE PUBLIC OFTEN SEES THE UNIVERSITY DIFFERENTLY

from those of us inside the academy. For many people, the most visible and vital role of many institutions is to sponsor athletics teams.

Universities must accept a share of the responsibility for this disconnect. Division I-A institutions, through their athletics departments, have been eager recipients of profitable television broadcast contracts. The networks demand more football and basketball games, on more days, at a variety of times. And the announcers, many of whom are former coaches, glorify the stars of these dramas—our students and coaches.

In pursuit of even more entertainment dollars, many universities have launched an “arms race” in the building of new settings for these dramas. They replace adequate, if aging, sports facilities with stadiums and arenas matching the best that pro franchises have to offer. Coaches’ and athletics directors’ salaries rise rapidly, with many exceeding seven figures. Little expense is spared for training aids, such as video equipment and workout rooms, and there are increased ancillary personnel, including media and marketing people.

The number of Division I-A athletics departments that spend more than \$50 million annually is increasing. As a result, despite increased revenue, the vast majority of Division I-A programs cannot balance their budgets without university subventions. Sometimes these subsidies are overt, but mostly they are buried in the operating budget (for example, in support for physical plant and debt service).

The public’s enormous interest in college sports has led to the blending of intercollegiate athletics with entertainment, which in turn has led to growing commercialization. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the American Council on Education showed that

most Americans believe sports are overemphasized on college campuses. And James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen argue convincingly in *The Game of Life* (see the article on page 23) that the separation between the cultures of athletics and academics on campuses is increasing, and institutions of all types apply different standards for admission and academic performance to athletes and nonathletes.

All this increasingly jeopardizes the essential mission of our universities. In fact, the situation threatens to reach crisis proportions in Division I-A football and men’s basketball programs. This undermines the integrity of our higher education system, and the damage will escalate if left unchecked.

**Two Flawed Solutions.** How are we to resolve these issues? Two extreme solutions have emerged, each with strong advocates. One seeks to radically downsize intercollegiate athletics, and the other would separate intercollegiate athletics from its university moorings by professionalizing it. Neither approach is tenable.

The first approach would have universities eliminate high-profile intercollegiate athletic contests and substitute competition at the club-sports level. Advocates for downsizing argue that subsidies now provided to athletics departments would be available for academic improvement.

The other suggestion moves in the opposite direction. It says the professionalization of college sports is inevitable, and rather than attempt to inhibit this development, we should promote it. Athletes would become paid independent professionals who may or may not be students. Universities would lease their stadiums and arenas to these teams, which would retain some connection by licensing the school’s name and logo, thereby enlisting the loyalty of alumni.

• BY MYLES BRAND •



The relationship between the universities and these teams would be like that of a city hosting a professional sports team. There would be pride of association and some contractual agreements, but the university, like a host city, would not have operational authority over the team.

This approach, so the argument continues, would release the university from the responsibility for major athletics programs and enable it to focus more fully on its academic mission. Problems of admission and retention standards, exploitation of college athletes, agent representation, and the pressures to have a winning program would disappear or be transferred to the professional organization.

Clearly, both of these suggestions have problems. Each is unrealistic. The purported benefits each claims are unlikely to materialize. Any attempt to eliminate a major Division I-A athletics program would create an overwhelming outcry. And hastening the movement toward full commercialization of basketball and football likewise would be resisted, though probably not to the same degree. The inertia and tradition of the current situation make radical change implausible.

More important, both suggestions suffer from a deeper problem: They neglect the positive side of college sports. Intercollegiate athletics, when conducted well and with good common sense, increase pride in the institution. Among other things, they strengthen the university's connections with alumni, students, faculty, and the broader community and generate sufficient revenue

to support nonrevenue sports, including women's sports.

Thus, the central issue is not to find a way to dismantle intercollegiate athletics but to limit its excesses so its positive features can flourish.

If we are to restore the proper role of intercollegiate athletics, we must make an absolute commitment to the academic mission and integrity of the university. Colleges and universities are part of the booming, buzzing confusion of the real world; they are social institutions of enormous complexity and of critical importance to the health and welfare of the country. But when a university undertakes ancillary activities, including entertainment through theater or athletics, these activities ultimately must serve an academic purpose and, crucially, must not interfere with the university's pursuit of its academic mission.

The two extreme positions—eliminating intercollegiate athletics and wholly professionalizing them—accept this principle of academic integrity. But they reject the additional premise that Division I-A athletics contribute to the fulfillment of this academic mission. We must justify that premise and show we can curtail the excesses of college sports.

To accomplish this goal we must renew the reform movement. Call it "Academics First." Academics First means committing the institution to taking the steps necessary to elevate the academic mission and integrity of the university to absolute first priority.

Like all reasonable reform programs, this is a gradual one, and success depends on how presidents and boards act. Although the NCAA is well positioned to institute specific reforms and ensure their compliance, its multiple constituencies (including the athletics establishment) limit its ability to lead any reform movement. In one way or another, through the NCAA or otherwise, university presidents must be the driving force for change, and they must have support from their boards.

A president also will find able allies in his

or her peers. It is not merely that there is safety in numbers, but presidents together can accomplish much that is not possible unilaterally.

The vehicle of any alliance for reform of Division I-A football and basketball is unlikely to be a Washington, D.C.-based higher education association. Rather, mutual support for athletics reform among presidents is most likely to begin at the conference level and evolve into collaboration among the leading conferences, including the ACC, Big 12, SEC, PAC-10, Big East, and Big Ten. In these small circles of similar schools, presidents have opportunities to examine and debate issues and take action. Conference commissioners also have a key role in promoting debate and enforcing reforms.

External groups can play crucial roles as well. The reincarnated Knight Commission may become a catalyst, and I look forward to its report later this year. The news media also can be enormously helpful in advancing the Academics First agenda. Its reports can provide positive reinforcement to universities and conferences that make progress. I assure you that university presidents will be emboldened and their boards supportive when the media make a point of praising those who dare to make a difference. Is that newsworthy? I certainly hope so.

**Hoop Dreams.** Turning from organizational issues to substantive ones, the most significant current challenges are posed by men's basketball. Compared with those of athletes in general, the graduation rates for Division I-A male basketball players are abysmal. There are several reasons for this underperformance. Some Division I-A basketball players attend college primarily or exclusively to position themselves for a professional career. They see college as a short-term proposition and have no plans to graduate.

Some have suggested freshmen ineligibility as a remedy. Advocates argue that this would allow incoming student-athletes to become academically grounded before engaging in athletic competition. However, it

would be unfair to prohibit all student-athletes, regardless of their sport or academic qualifications, from participating during their freshman year. Moreover, if freshmen were ineligible for varsity play, there would be strong pressure to ensure that their athletic development would not atrophy during this time. This, in turn, likely would lead to the return of freshman teams. Freshman teams would provide only modest gains in time for academic pursuits, and the costs of mounting a range of new freshman programs would be problematic, especially when cost containment should be a common goal.

An alternative approach to enhancing graduation rates among basketball players is more promising. At the outset, we should recognize that college is not for everyone, or at least not for everyone at the age of 18. Athletically talented young men should not be forced to attend college just to meet their

**The central issue is not to find a way to dismantle intercollegiate athletics but to limit its excesses so its positive features can flourish.**

goal of playing professionally. Pending legislation before the NCAA would redefine "amateurism" in a way that would permit athletes to participate professionally, giving up college eligibility equal only to the time they played a professional sport. Also, the NBA's developmental league begins play in November, and although officials have said players must be at least 20 years old, I strongly urge the league to accept players directly from high school.

This approach would have favorable academic consequences. More young men who aspire only to play basketball would have the opportunity to do so, without having to stop over in college. If they then find that they lacked the talent for a basketball career, or if

*It is difficult for one president to resist new facilities and higher salaries. It is easier for a conference to do so, if the presidents are willing.*

they changed their minds about a college education, they could return to college and participate.

Critics might say that this approach will siphon off the most talented players and harm the college game. True, some gifted players would not enroll in college, including some future stars. But this could be good, not harmful, for college basketball. It would neutralize some of the pressure to increase the entertainment value and to expand commercialization. More important, it would help ensure that those who enroll in college have a high regard for education, and not just for basketball. There would be more upperclassmen on the floor, and the graduation rates of student-athletes would improve. Only those who think the college game should become more like professional sports would see this approach as harmful.

Though taking preprofessional basketball players out of the mix of entering college students likely would improve graduation rates, far more significant steps are needed to ensure that many of these athletes receive the academic assistance they require. (The deep problem lies in their K-12 preparation, of course.) Athletics programs do a reasonably good job of providing tutorial services, but these efforts should be integrated into universitywide academic services. Integrating such programs with those of the general student body would provide safeguards against academic misconduct and help reverse the social isolation of student athletes.

**TV Timeouts.** Presidents also can help diminish the commercialization of college athletics. Working together, especially through conferences, presidents can limit the

times and days when basketball games are played, the number of breaks in games for commercials, the type and prevalence of advertising in stadiums and arenas, and the brand-name logos worn by players and coaches, to name a few examples.

One consequence of limiting commercialization is reduced revenues. This should lead to cost containment and some downsizing of the athletics enterprise, provided that presidents do not succumb to pressures to make up these losses with funds from elsewhere in the university. Is this a good thing? Yes, if the academic mission of the institution comes first.

Similarly, presidents and boards will just have to say "No" to demands for new facilities and escalating salaries. It is difficult, but not impossible, for one president to take this position. It is easier for a conference to do so, if the presidents are willing. And it is eminently doable when a coalition of the leading conferences agrees on joint action.

Intercollegiate athletics is at a crucial juncture. The values of the entertainment industry and the resulting commercialization are having negative effects. Extreme solutions, such as crippling college sports as we know it or acceding to the trend toward professionalization, sacrifice the benefits of a well-functioning intercollegiate athletics program. We can preserve these benefits by revitalizing the reform movement. While we don't want to turn off the game, we can lower the volume. ♦

*Myles Brand is president of Indiana University. This article is adapted from remarks he delivered in January to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.*