

Where Credit Is Due

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First, the *Post* revealed that football players in some of America's finest universities were receiving academic credit for participating in their sport, in courses taught by head coaches. Then, NBC, in a recent halftime piece aired during the Notre Dame-Michigan football game (and in which I was quoted), expressed indignation and called the practice fraud and cheating. Two athletic directors were shown on the telecast defending the practice of credit for athletics participation, but they were nothing more than sacrificial lambs. Sports columnists across the country are expressing their outrage about intercollegiate athletics gone wild again.

Unfortunately, these outraged broadcast and print commentators have forgotten how they set up their own class schedules when they were in college.

Credit for participation has long been part of college curricula. Universities, including the best public and private institutions, give credit for participation outside the classroom: performing in the symphony or singing in the choir, writing for the student newspaper, participating in dance or theater, and studying abroad or taking physical education activity classes. Many universities give credit for life experiences before entering college, especially for older students.

One large and growing category is service learning, in which students receive course credit

for participating in community activities such as volunteering in a soup kitchen, working with troubled youth or doing neighborhood cleanups. One-third of Division I-A schools give academic credit for participating in athletics practice, not only in football but in other sports as well.

Is this bad? Is it cheating? Is it fraud? It depends.

At most institutions of higher learning in this country, 120 semester credit hours, more or less, are required for graduation. Of that, about a third are designated for a major, say in physics, philosophy or journalism. Another third of the course work must be in general education; that is, required courses distributed across the disciplines but including English, math, foreign languages and so on. The final third of the typical university curriculum is made up of electives.

Elective courses cover a wide range. Some students use them to satisfy their intellectual curiosity in the arts and sciences; others use them to take courses that they simply find enjoyable. Some electives may be taken ungraded, pass-fail, and require little or no written work.

Nonetheless, participation courses for credit are a tricky business and open to abuse and fraud. In my opinion, credit for participation in athletics practice is permissible under carefully controlled conditions. It should be an elective for minimal credits—say, one or two—and be non-repeatable, attendance-required and pass-fail. To assign a letter grade gives an unfair advantage to student-athletes in determining their grade-point average. It is acceptable for a coach to teach the course, just as it is for the

symphony conductor to do so for participation in orchestra practice.

A recent, highly publicized case, in which an assistant coach gave a graded course for credit that had a silly final exam, is a clear case of academic fraud.

The university acted properly, I believe, in terminating that person.

Who is in charge of the curriculum? If the practice of offering credit for athletics participation is to be changed, who can do it? The answer is that in the contemporary university, the faculty has sole control over the content of the curriculum—not the coach or the athletics director, nor the university president, and certainly not the NCAA national office. It is up to the faculty on the campus to monitor the curriculum and to change it according to its best judgment.

In fact, the faculty may not want to eliminate elective-participation courses when these courses meet strict conditions. Not all the learning that takes place in college happens in class or through textbooks. Men and women who have graduated from college should have learned persistence in striving for goals and teamwork, leadership and personal communication skills. Activities such as athletics, music and ROTC—under the direction of a knowledgeable teacher and monitor—can teach these skills.

College credit for participation in athletics and other fields is more complex and nuanced than its critics allow. It would help if they did their homework before drawing conclusions.