

Brand tells delegates that fiscal responsibility is no myth

Jan 17, 2005 4:14:38 PM

Following is the full text of NCAA President Myles Brand's State of the Association address entitled, "The Myths of College Sports: Debunking the Four Great Commonly Held Misperceptions About Intercollegiate Athletics." Brand delivered his remarks during the January 8 opening business session at the 2005 NCAA Convention in Dallas.

This month, I begin my third year as president of the Association, and this is my third State of the Association speech.

In my first speech, delivered a little more than a week after taking office, I said that my efforts on behalf of intercollegiate athletics would be led by the twin guideposts of advocacy and reform. These two pillars are as important today as they were two years ago.

Last year, I spoke about the collegiate model of athletics that I believe is and must be value-based. Athletics must be fully integrated into the educational mission of its home university or college. I have spent the past year talking with groups across the country, building on that theme and helping differentiate college sports from professional sports.

Today, I want to provide some observations on what I have come to see as commonly held but generally inaccurate perceptions regarding intercollegiate athletics. I want to debunk four of the great myths about college sports. Doing so will set the stage for progress and advances in intercollegiate athletics.

By necessity, my focus will be limited in these remarks. In particular, I have to leave for another occasion a much-needed discussion concerning fairness and equity in the current practices of college sports.

The paucity of African-American head football coaches in Division I -- as well as in Divisions II and III -- and women in high positions from head coaches to athletics directors is simply appalling. The search process used to identify individuals for high-level positions is not universally open and fair.

I can find no moral justification for excluding from serious consideration qualified persons who are not of the over-represented race or gender. While some progress is being made (for example, the increase of African-American males in Division I athletics directorships, and men's basketball has achieved a critical mass of head coaches), there is a great deal more that must be accomplished in many areas.



During his State of the Association speech, NCAA President Myles Brand refuted four popular myths about college sports, one of which is that he is the czar of intercollegiate athletics.

Trevor Brown/NCAA Photos

As one of my colleagues told me during the first week on the job in January 2003, there is no shallow end to the pool we call intercollegiate athletics. You simply have to dive in and begin swimming.

The advice was correct. It is not possible to merely get your feet wet or tread water; it's a complete emersion from the first day.

However, I have been able to observe intercollegiate athletics with a fresh eye. As a university president for nearly 15 years, I was no stranger to intercollegiate athletics, but the administration of college sports was not my primary focus. The last two years in the office of NCAA president has led me to better appreciate a uniquely American experience -- the relationship between athletics and higher education.

Let me make clear that I have great respect for the enterprise and for the presidents, conference commissioners, athletics directors, other sports administrators, and for coaches and student-athletes. If you had followed me across America the last two years and visited with these individuals from campus to campus, you would have come away uplifted. I have met countless individuals who believe that what they do or support on the field or court is critically important to the development of future citizens and leaders.

And they are right.

To give one example, the Division II Student-Athlete Advisory Committee made a decision more than a year ago to embark upon a fund-raising initiative with the Make-A-Wish Foundation. With the help of Division II institutions and conferences, they met their goal almost 10 times over. This is only one instance of incredible success beyond the athletics arena.

This is citizenship and leadership of the finest kind. This is what the majority of the athletics programs in the NCAA are doing. This is the energy for public good generated by the majority of student-athletes. This is what college sports is about -- day to day and year to year.

At the same time, I also have come to understand that there are these often repeated, commonly held, mostly apocryphal, but sometimes self-fulfilling perceptions of intercollegiate athletics that focus on the worst cases and burden the balance of college sports to such a degree that the value and values of the enterprise are largely obscured.

Let's be honest.

Myths exist because there is a modicum of truth to the perceptions that then evolve into popularly accepted lore. The four myths that I will identify here have associated with them concerns that need serious attention. I am not a Pollyanna; all is not right with college sports. There are serious and complex challenges. But without reservation, I can say that these four areas are far more myth than reality.

Myth No. 1

College sports is more about sports than college. ...

...The perception is that student-athletes -- on their own or because of pressure from their coaches -- disproportionately attend to athletics skill development and winning than to the classroom and getting an education. These are athlete-students, not student-athletes.

That's the problem, according to this view. Intercollegiate athletics, as a component of the university, is failing at its most basic mission -- educating student-athletes.

The evidence, however, does not support the myth. This fall, the NCAA released the latest federally collected and federally mandated graduation rates for students and student-athletes at NCAA member institutions.

These estimates are too conservative. The way the federal government calculates the rates, transfers who leave an institution -- no matter their academic standing -- count against the institution, and those who transfer in and earn their degree never get counted at all. In addition, the government only tracks those who are on scholarship, so while a significant portion of Division I student-athletes are included, a much smaller group are counted in Division II and the numbers are virtually meaningless for Division III.

Nonetheless, student-athletes in both Divisions I and II graduate at a higher rate than the student body -- two percentage points in Division I, eight percentage points in Division II. Women graduate at higher rates than men, whites graduate more often than Blacks, but all demographic cohorts among student-athletes, including African-Americans, graduate at higher rates than among the general student body.

However -- and this is why the myth has grown -- football student-athletes and more so male basketball student-athletes, the two highest profile sports, graduate below both the student-athlete rate and the general student-body rate for both Divisions I and II. In Division I, the differential in football is modest, five percentage points, though in men's basketball, it is truly problematic with a differential of 16 percentage points.

Although some leave to try their hand at professional sports, there are not nearly enough of these young men to explain the disappointing low numbers. The bottom line is that too many student-athletes in these two sports are simply leaving before they earn a degree.

Make no mistake: There is a real concern about the numbers in these sports in both Divisions I and II. And Division III has its own concern about under-achievement among student-athletes compared to the rest of the Division III student body. A year ago at this Convention, Division III passed some of the most sweeping reforms in many years to refocus the time and attention of student-athletes on their educational goals.

This is an ongoing initiative for the Division III Presidents Council as it looks to the future and works to define the philosophical underpinning of those 421 institutions. Results from a membership-wide survey show overwhelming

support for the emphasis Division III puts on academics. This is important work for the division as it sets an agenda for the years ahead.

In April 2004, the Division I Board of Directors approved a package for academic reform that raised the bar for both incoming freshmen and enrolled student-athletes. To participate in college sports in Division I, high-school student-athletes must present a significantly higher level of academic preparation than ever before. And enrolled student-athletes have to make genuine progress term by term toward a degree. The Committee on Academic Performance is meeting at this Convention to define the parameters for both contemporaneous and historic, or long-term, penalties for specific sports teams that fail to achieve team-wide educational success.

These measures will change the culture of college sports. Success as a student as well as an athlete, simply, is the only acceptable standard for the future in college sports.

Student-athletes and their coaches will continue to focus on their sports during their seasons. It would be a denial of human nature to expect otherwise. And by the way, the available research data show that student-athletes do better academically during their season than when they are not competing. The academic-reform measures are designed to increase the graduation rates of student-athletes in Division I to bring to fruition the educational process for student-athletes.

One other piece to this myth that should not be ignored is the claim by cynics -- based, in all fairness, by some evidence and considerable anecdote -- that student-athletes are directed to easy courses, worthless majors and accommodating professors.

I have not seen a reliable and empirical measurement for the extent of this problem. But this I know. Some courses are easier than others. Some majors are more obviously career-based than others. Personally, I seriously doubt that, to any appreciable degree, faculty members are more accommodating to student-athletes. In fact, student-athletes sometimes claim that the opposite is true, that some faculty members intentionally fail to accommodate their needs for travel and other aspects of student-athlete life. But the main point is that all of these courses and majors are available to the entire student body.

The academic integrity of an institution is primarily in the hands of the faculty. They create and approve the courses and curriculum, and they set the standards for instruction. You cannot bring national policy to bear on the courses or majors or instructors a student -- or even a group of students -- select. And you cannot monitor or dictate the content of courses or majors from off-campus; that is an abridgement of academic freedom.

We presume that the courses and majors offered are worthy of the university. If they are not, shame on the university faculty. If student-athletes are deliberately herded into courses and majors that do not allow them to emerge with an honorable degree or a quality higher education experience, shame on those who permit such practices.

Recently, the football coach of a major Division I-A program was quoted saying, "I was hired to win; I wasn't hired to graduate student-athletes."

I do not fault only the coach. He clearly has been sent messages that his No. 1 priority, in fact the security of his future employment, is based on winning football games. This appears to be a message that is being sent far too often by those who do the hiring and firing.

The academic reforms recently adopted by Division I provide strong incentives for coaches to recruit and support academically able student-athletes. The new requirements will make ineligible student-athletes who do not apply themselves academically. Thus, a coach who wishes to have competitive teams and to stay within the rules will have to identify academically prepared student-athletes and motivate them to take their studies seriously. That is, given the new academic requirements, it is in the self-interest of coaches to focus on the academic success of student-athletes.

One of the important and distinguishing features of the collegiate model of athletics is that education is the goal, not sports entertainment. On the whole, intercollegiate athletics -- based on both available evidence and reform practice - meets that goal. That intercollegiate athletics is more about sports than college is a myth.

Myth No. 2

College sports is only about the money and the student-athlete is the forgotten pawn. ...

...College sports is big business in which the top personalities earn million-dollar salaries. It is the world of sports entertainment, indistinguishable from professional athletics. It has succumbed to the machinations of media networks and has sold its soul to corporate America.

Has the drive for financing intercollegiate athletics pushed the enterprise off center from the mission of higher education? Have dollars replaced the student-athlete as the object of the entire effort? If true, how on earth did America's great universities get to this position?

Intercollegiate athletics is not inexpensive. It is not as costly as many perceive it to be, but the costs are not trivial. Many or most in the general public and perhaps even the media assume that athletics eats up 25 percent or more of a Division I-A university's budget. In fact, the percentage of the university's budget consumed by athletics can be higher at smaller programs because of fixed costs, but the average Division I-A program represents only 3 to 4 percent of university expenditures.

Still, the average Division I university expends almost \$15 million on its intercollegiate athletics program, and those in Division I-A average about \$27 million.

It is critical to note that these budgets have risen at the same time higher education has gone through a series of economic downturns. The financial pressures of maintaining and enhancing large physical plants, competing for, hiring and retaining faculty and staff, and increased technology demands have exacerbated the problem.

The need and desire for additional resources in other areas of the university, coupled with the low priority placed on athletics by some faculty members and others on campus, create pressure in Division I to minimize or eliminate institutional subsidy for sports.

In fact, the more revenue that an athletics department can accrue in order to offset its expenditures, the more university general funds can be allocated to perceived higher priority areas.

Finding outside revenue sources, often from enlarged media contracts, has coincided nicely -- and at just the right time -- for higher education. The result has been fast-flowing new revenue streams for athletics at just the time higher education needed relief from the mounting financial pressures of running a complex campus.

But there have been significant consequences, as well. Here is the problem.

The increased ability of college sports to enhance revenues, especially through the sale of media rights, enabled Division I athletics departments to grow expenditures at rates higher than that of other parts of the university. It also led to significant capital investment in facilities, most often through bonds to be paid by projected future athletics-generated revenues.

The need for increasing the rate at which the revenue expands also has resulted in an inflated need to increase wins. And the growing need for more wins has increased the competition for outstanding student-athletes and coaches. As a result, the competition for student recruits, especially in the two revenue sports, has led to excesses of the kind played out in headlines much of the past spring. And the competition for good coaches has resulted in a market that yields compensation packages for a selected few that puts them in the rarified air of celebrities and at odds with faculty and others.

In fact, in Division I-A football, the result has been an expanded market for coaches, which includes both college and professional teams. While this has resulted in higher compensation packages -- and higher fees for coaches' agents - - it has led to the evaluation of coaches in ways that are more appropriate to the professional coaches. Tolerance for the time necessary to build a program has given way to the requirement for high levels of immediate and annually sustained success.

We all see what has happened. This escalation -- this spiraling -- of success demanding even more success has good people of noble intentions chasing both the carrot and their tails. And if the ready flow of media revenues or corporate sponsorships does not increase at the expected rate, what then?

And while there will be sufficient support -- in all likelihood -- so that athletics budgets will continue to increase, the expectations for the current high rate of growth cannot be met in the future. There will be disappointments when the rate of growth moderates.

Worse, this mounting financial problem threatens the integrity of the university. When the public -- both local and en masse -- begin to believe that the value of the institution is to be measured by the success of its athletics teams, the core mission of the university is threatened. The central role of the faculty is ignored in favor of winning the big game

or recruiting the next young man with athletics star potential. And the ability of the university to successfully educate and push forward the boundaries of knowledge and the creative arts is compromised.

By the way, don't think the impact of these spiraling expectations is directed only at the Division I-A programs. The same process has driven some I-AA programs to move their football programs to I-A and some Division II programs to seek the visibility of Division I. The growing sense that moving "to the next level" will result in either enhanced academic reputation or new institutional revenue streams -- or both -- has pushed some institutions to try to move their athletics programs.

It has become of such concern to the leadership of Division II that a Presidential Summit will be conducted in June to discuss the problem. The Division II Presidents Council also has commissioned a study of specific cases in which institutions have left for Division I for the supposed glory and money. The study will examine the level of satisfaction with the move, as well as the financial and programmatic ramifications. I applaud the effort. It should result in more institutions following data rather than anecdote, and mission rather than illusion.

This spiraling fiscal problem must be arrested. It will take a systematic and strategic effort to do so.

There are campuses where athletics programs are being conducted exactly right, where they are, in fact, behaving fiscally responsibly. Unfortunately, there are far too few.

The goal is to transport these successful strategies and practices to a much broader range of schools, while recognizing that no two schools operate in the same context or have the same traditions or strengths.

This is where I expect to focus a good portion of my attention over the next several years. The key will be to engage the interests and action of college and university presidents.

In my view, we must develop a process for value- and mission-based budgeting of athletics that parallels the way budgets for other university programs are set. The central point is that the value of an athletics program must ultimately rest on its support of an integration into the educational mission and traditions of the university.

We must arrest the slide toward professional athletics and the sports entertainment industry. And while the problem is not of crisis proportions right now, the time to avoid turning this myth into reality is now.

It will not likely be possible in the future to increase athletics department budgets at a rate appreciably higher than the general university rate of budgetary increases. That will require athletics departments, like other areas of the university, to use resources effectively and efficiently. But good business practices constitute only part of fiscal responsibility.

The popular view is that you have to increase spending to increase wins, and you have to increase wins to increase revenues.

However, a major NCAA-funded economic study released in 2003 and updated last year shows no correlation -- at least over the medium term, that is, about a decade -- that this view is correct. The study found no correlation between increased spending and increased winning or between increased winning and increased revenues.

But these data and results have made little difference. The spending spiral has not abated, and the strong -- if mistaken -- belief that spending more than your competitors will lead to increased winning has propelled athletics departments to increase expenditures...no matter the facts. The behavior is irrational in light of the available evidence, but there it is, nonetheless.

One reason, in Division I, may be its philosophy statement adopted in the late 1970s, which has been used by member institutions as a mandate for self-sufficiency. The statement is fairly innocuous. It says simply that an institution in Division I "strives to finance its athletics programs insofar as possible from revenues generated by the program itself."

On the surface, the principle is more sound financial management advice than a mandate for autonomous functioning. But the practical effect has been to push athletics programs outside an institution's normal budgeting process, to put unparalleled pressure on athletics administrators to find revenue streams outside the university, including accommodating major donors, to increase the pressure on coaches -- and student-athletes, I might add -- to win, and to adopt an approach that views intercollegiate athletics as an ancillary enterprise.

From a practical perspective, it doesn't work. About 40 of the approximately 325 Division I institutions claim that they operate athletics in the black. I am skeptical. When all the costs are taken into account, including facilities and physical plant, academic support, grants-in-aid partially absorbed by the general fund, and hidden subsidies, I suspect the number that genuinely balance expenses with revenues is not much more than a dozen.

Congratulations to the few, but it is unrealistic to pressure the vast majority of athletics departments to become self-sufficient.

Athletics must bring value to the university, in terms of its academic mission. In doing so, it puts itself in the right position to be supported, if necessary, by the university.

If, however, a campus component as high-profile and expensive as athletics -- that contributes to the education developmental experience of 400 to 800 students -- is not contributing to the mission of the university, why has it been a part of the American campus for more than a century? And how do we justify its future place on campus?

It is far too risky to take athletics outside the normal lines of accountability at the university. When there are major problems or scandals in athletics, the entire university is affected. Athletics is too visible and influential to be ancillary and too enriching to the university experience to be ignored as a contribution to the mission of higher education. And if it has value in the university's meeting its mission, it deserves to be supported, if needed.

Value-based budgeting depends on an athletics program contributing to the fulfillment of the university's missions. As I define it, fiscal responsibility in college sports is more than a financial strategy; it means more than operating

efficiently. It means using the resources provided in ways that go beyond winning. It means being committed in word and especially in deed to the goals and the reasons for which the university exists.

It means the integration of college sports within the academic mission of the university, and it means keeping student-athletes at the center of what we do.

Myth No. 3

Myles Brand is the czar of college sports. ...

...This, of course, is my personal favorite.

It grows out of a notion that the NCAA controls every aspect of intercollegiate athletics. And if that is so, why doesn't the NCAA and Myles Brand step in and control those things that are really broken?

It is not infrequent that I receive letters or read newspaper columns that urge me -- the all-powerful NCAA president -- to do the right thing... say, cap coaching salaries. Bring sanity to facility expansion. Define campus budget priorities. And especially respond to the clamor of fans and the media to create a Division I-A football playoff.

What is really being asked is that I ride roughshod over the wishes of the membership and install a form of collegiate martial law.

This is a myth that is born, of course, from a lack of understanding of the NCAA as an association of members. I have spoken before about the systematic ambiguity of the term "NCAA." It can mean the national office in Indianapolis; it can mean the thousand or so colleges and universities that belong to the Association; or it can mean the governing body, the collection of committees that make the rules, as well as the rules themselves.

While it is clear that the Executive Committee through restructuring intends that there is a larger leadership role from the office of NCAA president and the Indianapolis staff, leadership is not the same as control. Certainly, I have the bully pulpit and I have used it to urge action, change, reform and common sense. I also have urged new approaches to the work of the Association and new opportunities to serving its overall membership.

In my first State of the Association speech, I called for development of a first-time-ever strategic plan. That plan was presented to this Convention last year and has been approved by the Executive Committee. It sets the goals for the Association and intercollegiate athletics for the next three to five years and proscribes the values that will govern college sports for the next several decades.

But the democratic process through representative governance determines what decisions will be made. And the driving force -- the agents of change -- in this process are the college and university presidents.

The real czar of college sports is the will of the membership determined by university presidents.

Myth No. 4

Amateurism itself is a myth.

...I have saved this for last because it is in many ways the most complex of the four myths. It is both insidious and pervasive. While amateurism is the defining difference between the collegiate and professional models of sports, it has become the lightning rod for those who would relegate intercollegiate athletics to a third-rate campus version of professional sports.

The underlying problem of the myth is that it is based on a false assumption of what amateurism is. The popular notion is that amateurism means athletics on the cheap. Student-athletes aren't paid, and coaches and others should receive only minimum salaries. The facilities of 80 years ago should be good enough for today. And uniforms and other equipment should be hand-me-downs.

But since college sports is now all about the money -- compare Myth No. 2 -- amateurism is dead and student-athletes should be paid. They should share in the profits of football and basketball.

I could not be more opposed.

Amateurism is not about how much; it is about why. It is not about the money; it is about the motivation.

The collegiate model -- with amateurism as only part of it -- is based on the idea that students come to college to get an education, and some of them -- the most gifted and most determined -- play sports under the banner of the university for the love of the game. As old fashioned as that may sound, I challenge the cynics to survey the 360,000 student-athletes who participate in college sports to see if they don't overwhelmingly say that is exactly why they play.

They understand better than those who would lead the funeral procession for amateurism that participation in athletics is an aspect of the collegiate experience unique to the American campus, unique to those blessed with the opportunity to play, and uniquely suited to the development of attitudes and virtues that will serve them well throughout their lifetimes.

Amateurism has never been about the size of budgets or salaries. It isn't about facility expansion, or skyboxes or commercialism. Amateurism is about why student-athletes play sports. And that, we should never change.

* * *

There is something these four myths have in common. While they exaggerate the problems, they draw attention to the fact that we can be easily distracted from our primary mission within higher education and intercollegiate athletics -- the education of the student and the student-athlete.

To the degree that we permit our behaviors to be obsessed by factors other than the success of student-athletes, intercollegiate athletics misses the mark. It is off center.

From day to day and from campus to campus, these myths are nothing more than hyperbole about the worst instances of misguided behavior. The vast majority of student-athletes and coaches, of athletics directors and presidents, are living out the values of athletics on the campus. I have great confidence in them all.

However, as I noted at the outset, myths have standing because there is a modicum of truth in them. They have grown in proportion to the complexity with which we must manage intercollegiate athletics. The work before us now is to recenter college sports, align this enterprise with the academic mission of the university, bring fiscal responsibility to the way in which we manage the business of intercollegiate athletics, especially value-based budgeting, and keep the spotlight focused on the success of student-athletes.

In dispelling these myths of college sports, we have cleared the undergrowth and made way for planting the seeds of future success. Some seeds already have been sown through completion of the majority of legislation for academic reform. The remaining planting involves robust and far-reaching attention to fiscal responsibility. Our harvest will be the returned emphasis, too long lost, on student-athlete success, on the field, in the classroom and for life.

At the 2006 Convention, we will commence our observance of the NCAA's Centennial. The theme and logo for that year-long exercise has been decided. We will be celebrating the student-athlete.

The issues and problems and challenges will not all be gone. There will be some who come to college to play sports with little or no interest in getting an education. Money will continue to provide us with both the opportunities to support student-athletes and with the temptation to behave irresponsibly. Some will continue to blame the police when there is a new crime wave or expect solutions to problems to be dictated rather than developed through democratic process. And we will continue to argue endlessly about whether amateurism is alive and well or whether it is dead and should be buried.

But, if we want to put the lie to these four commonly held myths about college sports, we should keep before us these four words -- celebrate the student-athlete.