

EDITORIAL: It should be books before bowl games in UC system



Montana running back Travon Van (8) runs the ball against UC Davis during the second half of an NCAA college football game, Saturday, Oct. 18, 2014, in Missoula, Mont.

LIDO VIZZUTTI — AP

If ever there were a sign that the University of California needs to take a step or 12 back from sports-entertainment money, it was in the failure of regents last week to hold UC coaches more accountable for athletes' education.

Talk about rationalizations. Regent Eddie Island described the notion that books should automatically come before bowl games as "cultural arrogance" — a stunning misunderstanding of the role of academics and athletics. University of California is, as its name implies, a university, not a minor league sports franchise. Like universities nationwide, UC needs to rethink the balance between athletics and academics.

Last week's debate arose from a 2013 NCAA report in which UC Berkeley's football team posted some of the lowest graduation rates in the nation. But faced with a choice between sports rankings and academic reputations, UC President Janet Napolitano initiated a proposal so modest that it verged on "illusory," in the words of Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Oh, it sounded groundbreaking to make coaches' bonuses contingent on teams' academic performance. But, as Newsom pointed out, the proposed benchmark was so low that it was almost impossible to miss it. In fact, Newsom noted, that same benchmark already determines the bonuses of most coaches, since, under NCAA rules, teams that don't meet an academic progress threshold can't compete in the postseason play that triggers most of the big bumps in coaches' contracts.

“We’re doing almost nothing here, under the illusion we’re doing something,” said the lieutenant governor, who by law is also a regent. This prompted Regent Sherry Lansing to worry aloud about a “bias against sports” if standards were toughened, and the UCLA athletic director to warn of a hail of terrible “unintended consequences,” from cheating to (gasp!) losing.

They had to be kidding, right? Not really.

“A college degree is not the goal of every athlete who comes to the university,” said Island, a retired Santa Monica lawyer.

So, why are the rest of us subsidizing their education?

The sad truth is, Island is right: Too many athletically gifted kids with too little academic preparation come to play at the UCs every year, believing it will be their ticket to the big leagues. But as the supposed adults in the room, UC officials should do more than rake in the TV revenue and encourage them to skip class.

Less than 2% of college athletes will play professionally, according to NCAA figures. In 2013, the NBA drafted only 46 of nearly 4,000 graduating college basketball players. The NFL drafted 254 college football players out of more than 15,500.

Those odds imply an obligation to prepare these kids for lives after sports — an obligation that begins with their coaches.

Yet interviews conducted in the wake of the UC Berkeley graduation rate scandal showed that, despite NCAA caps, athletes routinely spend so much time practicing that they can’t finish their homework. And many fear being cut if they hit the books because their scholarships run for only a year at a time so that coaches can weed out “low performers.”

And how does UC motivate its coaches? Newsom pointed to the contract of UCLA men’s basketball coach Steve Alford. Alford, who at last count was the highest paid state employee in California, is guaranteed just \$10,000 for seeing to it that his athletes get a meaningful diploma. His bonuses for making it to the NCAA tournament? Some \$270,000.

Above all, the UC needs an intervention. Collegiate sports may be addicted to TV money, but the taxpayers of California don’t have to enable it.

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