

Is Big-Time Sports a Core University Function?

Charles T. Clotfelter¹

Duke University

January 2011

The fall of 2009 witnessed noteworthy decisions about athletics at two flagship American universities – the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. At Berkeley, the decision was a vote by the faculty senate on a resolution regarding subsidies to the university’s athletic department. In the wake of stunning rates of unemployment and home foreclosures in California, a state budget crisis marked by furloughs for state employees, a proposed 32% increase in tuition, a projected university deficit of \$150 million, and student protests over planned cuts, the issue of athletic subsidies rose to unaccustomed prominence.² The precipitating factor was information that came to light revealing not only that the athletic department was regularly subsidized by the university, but also that the department had run additional deficits. What raised the ire of critics was the revelation that the central administration had, two years before, forgiven an accumulation of past department overruns amounting to more than \$30 million.³ At a tense faculty senate meeting where administrators sought to defend the subsidies, the debate on the floor ultimately came down to university priorities. A world of limited resources had become one of shrinking resources. Was athletics worth \$7 million a year, or more?

The faculty senate declared it was not. By a vote of 91 to 68, the faculty body decided to ask the chancellor to put an end to annual subsidies and to require the repayment of the previous year’s unbudgeted deficit. One faculty supporter of the resolution told the student newspaper, “The resolution is about priorities....Will our world-class public university put entertainment ahead of education?”⁴ The vote itself was not binding, of course, because the Berkeley faculty,

¹ Professor of Public Policy, Economics, and Law, Sanford School of Public Policy. This paper is based on chapter 2 in *Big-Time Sports in American Universities* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) and is not for citation without permission.

² Wollan, Malia and Tamar Lewin, “Students Protest Tuition Increases,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2009.

³ Doug Lederman, “Bad Time for Sports Overspending,” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 30, 2009.

⁴ Williams, Zach E.J., “Resolution Urges End to Campus Athletic Funding,” *The Daily Californian*, November 6, 2009, <http://www.dailycal.org/article/107387>, 1/16/10.

like those in most universities, have little more than symbolic influence in shaping university decisions. With the approval of the university's regents the following spring, the university pressed on with plans to finance upgrades to its football stadium by borrowing money and charging fans \$2,700 and up for "seat licenses" giving purchasers the rights to buy season tickets for the new stadium's best seats.⁵

The second decision was announced without debate by the administration at the University of Alabama that December. As its football team prepared for the upcoming national championship game, scheduled shortly after New Year's Day in Pasadena, the Alabama central administration announced it would cancel three days of classes that January so that students, faculty, and staff could attend the game.⁶ Although this decision was perhaps merely a pragmatic response to an unspoken reality, it was criticized as an example of misplaced priorities. Indeed, it was an action that could not easily be reconciled with the university's own mission statement, which appears on the university's website⁷:

Our Mission

To advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the State through quality programs of teaching, research, and service.

Although this decision by the University of Alabama was unusually stark in exposing the conflict between academic and athletic priorities, it was by no means unique among the many choices routinely made by many American universities. Earlier that season, for example, the University of North Carolina had instructed the 12,000 university and hospital employees at its Chapel Hill campus to leave work at 3:00 p.m., without pay, on a weekday in order to clear the parking lots and ease the traffic jams expected for the nationally televised football game scheduled for that evening.⁸ Some university presidents make it their business to meet personally with prized high school recruits during their campus visits.⁹ Much more common are the

⁵ Lance Williams, "Amid Fiscal Crisis, UC Berkeley Commits \$320 Million to Football," *California WatchBlog*, February 17, 2010; James Zhao, "New Council to Look into Athletics Funding," *Daily Californian*, April 5, 2010.

⁶ Stan Diel, "University of Alabama Cancels Three Days of Classes Surrounding Championship Game," *Birmingham News*, December 8, 2009.

⁷ <http://www.ua.edu/mission.html>, 1/25/08.

⁸ "Major Inconvenience," *Daily Tar Heel*, September 3, 2009; Office of Sponsored Research, http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:fyhToXCtOdMJ:research.unc.edu/osr/information/general_info.php+unc+chapel+hill+number+of+employees&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us, 1/9/10.

⁹ For example, the president of the University of Oklahoma met with basketball recruit Harrison Barnes during the latter's official campus recruiting visit, according to Barnes' diary posted on Highschoolhoop.com,

everyday policies that accommodate academic practices to the demands of big-time athletics, such as relaxed admissions standards and special dormitories.

The cancelling of classes to accommodate a football game would surely have puzzled the foreign visitor imagined by Henry Pritchett in 1929, who naively asked what commercial sports had to do with the operation of a university. But this is precisely the question that must begin any serious study of the role of big-time sports in American universities. To make sense of the decisions and policies the American universities that operate these big-time programs today, it is necessary to be equally naïve and pose the fundamental question, “What is the university’s purpose?” To most outsiders, this simple question will no doubt seem rather straightforward, one that should be easy to answer. But to those who work inside universities, the reality is apt to look a lot more complicated, more nuanced. A skeptic might even wonder whether the university *has* a purpose, or can have one. Scholars of higher education have pondered this question, and their analyses turn out to depend on considerations of organization and internal decision-making. If we want to explain why universities engage in commercial sports entertainment, therefore, we must address these issues of organization, decision-making, and collective purpose.

Before expending much effort in trying to answer the visitor’s question concerning the role of and justification for having commercial athletics in American universities, we might want to ask whether this function is important enough to warrant serious attention in the first place. If big-time sports is merely an incidental, optional, and unimportant activity, unrelated to the real business of universities, why bother worrying about it? If, like the human appendix, this department has no important function in the functioning of the larger enterprise, except perhaps when things go badly wrong, it should ultimately be of little consequence for the universities that contain them. As we will see in the next chapter, a uniquely American set of historical circumstances led to the insinuation and growth of athletic competition sponsored by universities in this country. If, as seems quite possible, the original reasons for this growth are long gone, it is quite possible that the giant college sports enterprises we observe today are in fact of little practical consequence for the main work of the universities where they exist. And if that were the case, one could justify viewing big-time athletic departments as a thing quite separate from the goals and functions of the university to which they are attached, being there only by virtue of historical accident. No one taking a serious look at universities would need to pay too much attention, even if spectators and the media do. So it will be important to ask, is big-time sports important to the work of universities?

Evidence presented in the next chapter will establish, I think, that commercial sports is indeed a significant function in universities that incorporate it and therefore a worthy subject for serious study. But, as we will see, there is a striking tendency among those who should know the

<http://www.highschoolhoop.com/recruiting-news/2009/10/the-harrison-barnes-diary-official-visit-to-oklahoma/>, 8/24/10.

most about the question to ignore big-time college sports altogether, either as a significant part of the university's structure or as a serious subject within the larger study of higher education. This lack of attention contrasts sharply not only with the manifest evidence of popular attention to college athletics but also to the nature of the criticism leveled against the role of college sports by leaders in American higher education.

This chapter addresses two interrelated questions. First, how does commercial sports fit into the larger aim of universities, if at all? This is the foreign visitor's naive question. To answer it, the first part of the chapter examines what those who should know say the purpose of universities is. The authorities I turn to are universities themselves and scholars of higher education. Are their statements consistent with the reality we observe? As we will see, some prominent university leaders over the years have argued that commercial sports is not consistent with the aims of universities. But if that is the case, why do universities continue to engage in it? This question leads to the second issue dealt with in the chapter – decision-making – which leads in turn to a consideration of the university as an organization. This seemingly esoteric topic turns out to have real significance for how decisions are made, because universities lack the clear chain of command found in armies, corporations, and most bureaucracies. In the end, therefore, it is impossible to divorce the discussion of purpose from that of power.

Commercial Sports and the University's Mission

It is surely no secret that big-time sports has occasionally been criticized as being at odds with the proper aims of universities. Among the critics have been leading figures in American higher education. Consider the pronouncements of six university presidents:

There's too much identification of a university with non-academic aspects, distracting from values of higher education and from desirable values in society.

Unidentified president of Football Bowl Subdivision university, Knight Commission Study, 2009¹⁰

Educational institutions have absolutely no business operating farm systems for the benefit of the National Football League and the National Basketball Association.

Derek Bok, former president, Harvard University, 2003¹¹

Big-time college athletics has little to do with the nature or objectives of the contemporary university. Instead, it is a commercial venture, aimed primarily at providing public entertainment for those beyond the campus and at generating rewards for those who stage it.

James Duderstadt, former president, University of Michigan, 2000¹²

¹⁰ Knight Commission (2009, p. 30).

¹¹ Bok (2003, p. 125).

In truth, why should an institution whose primary devotion [is] to education and scholarship devote so much effort to competitive athletics?

*Harold Shapiro, former president, University of Michigan and Princeton, 2000*¹³

The emphasis on athletics and social life that infects all colleges and universities has done more than most things to confuse these institutions and to debase the higher learning in America.

*Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, 1936*¹⁴

The side shows are so numerous, so diverting, -- so important, if you will -- that they have swallowed up the circus, and those who perform in the main tent must often whistle for their audiences, discouraged and humiliated.

*Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton University, 1909*¹⁵

Is big-time sports really inconsistent with the aims of universities? To answer this question, one obvious approach would be to find out just what universities themselves say about what their aims are. Fortunately, universities make it easy to do this, because most of them make it a practice to formulate and publicize formal statements of their corporate objectives. Another approach one might take is to consult experts on higher education to see what they perceive to be the role of commercial athletics in the overall operation of universities. After examining a collection of published mission statements, therefore, I turn next to academic studies of higher education in order to discern what importance scholars attach to commercial college sports.

What Universities Say Their Missions Are

Most universities publish formal summaries of their corporate objectives in the form of mission statements. These statements are readily available for public inspection on universities' individual webpages. Most of these pronouncements are brief, running no more than a handful of paragraphs and a few hundred words. Some of them mention their histories or regional ties. Some list honored values and traditional objectives. Some list specific schools or other administrative units while others stick to generalities. Whatever the length or format, however, almost all of them are sure to mention the three functions traditionally cited by those who speak for universities: teaching, research, and service. This trinity permeates the language of

¹² Duderstadt (2000, p. 11).

¹³ Shapiro (2000, p. 29).

¹⁴ Hutchins (1936, p. 11).

¹⁵ Wilson (1909, p. 576).

contemporary American universities, from evaluations of faculty performance to speeches by presidents, so it should be no surprise that these three elements consistently show up in university mission statements.

Of the two universities mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, only one, Alabama, has a published mission statement applying to its main campus. Quoted in its entirety above, its 21 words unmistakably feature this academic trinity. UC Berkeley has no published mission statement, but the larger University of California does, running some 400 words in length. And that statement begins by emphasizing those same three activities common to research universities: “The University's fundamental missions are teaching, research and public service.” This statement goes on to elaborate upon these three functions, naming areas of instruction, fields of research, and types of public service. It mentions four organizational entities specifically, the extension service, medical centers, libraries, and museums. Indeed, the variety of activities under the umbrella of the modern university inspired former chancellor Clark Kerr to coin the term “multiversity.”¹⁶

Neither of these mission statements, however, mentions athletic competition or entertainment as a function it performs or values. Although both universities receive more national attention for their successful athletic programs than for all other activities put together (a fact that is documented in the next chapter), both mission statements are entirely mute on the subject of athletics. In this omission, these two universities are typical of most other universities that operate big-time sports programs. Although such universities always mention research and teaching as core functions and most also mention service, only a few of them include athletics.

One possible explanation for this omission is that such general statements of purpose simply leave no room for a listing of particular functions beyond broad categories like research, teaching, and service, especially in a statement as brief as the University of Alabama's. But the University of California's statement shows this is not always the case, because it specifically mentions such administrative units as agricultural extension, museums, and libraries. Indeed, this explanation does not hold up, since many mission statements do in fact mention particular activities beyond the big three functions.

To take a closer look at what universities actually say about their objectives, I searched on the Web for the mission statements for 58 universities with big-time sports programs. These were the members of the five biggest football conferences plus Notre Dame.¹⁷ Of these 58

¹⁶ Kerr (1994).

¹⁷ The five established conferences in 2010 and their 57 members in 2010 were: Southeastern Conference (SEC): Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, LSU, Ole Miss, Mississippi State, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vanderbilt; Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC): Boston College, Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Maryland, Miami, North Carolina, NC State, Virginia, Virginia Tech, Wake Forest; Pacific 10 (Pac-10):

universities, only six, including UC Berkeley, did not have published mission statements in 2008.¹⁸ I analyzed the text of those 52 statements, looking first for references to the big three functions – teaching, research, and service. All of the mission statements cited teaching and research, and all but one cited service as part of their missions. Despite the fact that all of the universities in the sample operated big-time sports enterprises, athletics was mentioned by only five universities, less than a tenth of them.¹⁹

In fairness, some mission statements are very general, like the one for the University of Alabama quoted above. Statements in this category are written in deliberately general terms, and, as a result, include no references to particular units. Thus, it seems unfair to expect that statements of this sort would mention particular units, like athletics. Therefore, I also counted the number of references to schools and other administrative units, such as a law school. I then compared the number of specific references to the number of universities that actually housed such a unit. In this way I could compare the chance that a university would mention its law school, for example, to the chance that it would mention its athletic program. So, how did this 10% chance compare to the likelihood that mission statements would mention other units?

The resulting list for all the tabulated functions is presented in Figure 2.1. As the figure plainly shows, this 10% rate was low, ranking below the chance that these universities would mention their journalism, pharmacy, or nursing schools. In their mission statements, these universities were much more likely to mention their extension service, medical school, or school of architecture than they were to mention their athletic program.²⁰ It is natural to wonder what the source of this reluctance might be. I return to consider this question below.

Arizona, Arizona State, Cal Berkeley, Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, UCLA, USC, Washington, Washington State; Big Ten: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Wisconsin; Big 12: Baylor, Colorado, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech.

¹⁸ UCLA had its own, but UC Berkeley did not, so the latter was not included. Other universities without mission statements were the University of Arkansas, Louisiana State, Florida State, Arizona State, and Stanford.

¹⁹ The five universities whose mission statements included references to athletics were: University of Nebraska (“Special units with distinct missions include... Intercollegiate Athletics.”); Ohio State University (“Our intercollegiate athletic programs will routinely rank among the elite few.”); University of Southern California (“Our first priority as faculty and staff is the education of our students, from freshmen to postdoctorals, through a broad array of academic, professional, extracurricular and athletic programs of the first rank.”); University of Virginia (“To seek the ablest and most promising students, within the Commonwealth and without; and, in keeping with the intentions of Thomas Jefferson, to attend to their total development and well-being; and to provide appropriate intellectual, athletic, and social programs.”); and Wake Forest University (“The University recognizes the benefits of intercollegiate athletics conducted with integrity and at the highest level.”)

²⁰ These results are described in more detail in Appendix 2A.1.

Athletics as Seen by Scholars of Education

In 2002 Stanford University Press published a collection of essays, edited by a prominent scholar of American higher education and written by what one reviewer called “a star cast of authors,” whose aim was to consider the future of American research universities.²¹ Entitled *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, it dealt with a broad array of topics. It covered issues of longstanding significance, such as the expansion of knowledge, changes in the curriculum, research in the life sciences, interdisciplinary research, faculty recruitment, tenure, unionization, rising tuition, university organization, and student services. It also covered new trends and challenges, including corporate sponsorship, university-industry research collaborations, the incorporation of new technologies, new revenue streams, demographic changes, and the use of the Internet in teaching. But nowhere in the book’s 353 pages is there a single mention of athletics, commercial or otherwise.

The neglect of the subject of commercial sports in this 2002 book is not unusual. It is typical of serious scholarly research about American universities. As far back as 1976 it was noted by the non-academic intellectual James Michener in his book *Sports in America*: “it is easier to find a good study on the effect of the Flemish language on the children of Antwerp than to discover from articles in learned journals what really goes on in the sports department of the university in which the scholars reside.”²² This is not to say that scholars have ignored commercial athletics as a topic for research, only that college sports has been a topic studied on its own, not as a topic of “higher education.” Most of what is written and published by experts on higher education, like the essays in that 2002 volume, resemble university mission statements in hardly mentioning athletics at all. Books about universities with titles such as *The University in a Corporate Culture* (2003) ; *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education* (2004); *Higher Education for the Public Good: Emerging Voices from a National Movement* (2005); *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social, Political, and Economic Challenges* (2005); and *American Universities in a Global Market* (2010) manage to present quite general analyses of higher education in the U.S. without ever mentioning athletics.²³ The same is true for entire volumes of the leading academic journal devoted to higher education, *The Journal of Higher Education*.²⁴ Commercial athletics is also

²¹ Philip G. Altbach, Review of *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, *Journal of Higher Education* 75 (2004), p. 364.

²² Michener (1976, p. 9).

²³ Gould (2003); Kirp (2004); Kezar (2005); Altbach, Berdahl and Gumpert (2005); and Clotfelter (2010).

²⁴ Of the 70 articles published in the journal in 2007 and 2008, none had titles that mentioned athletics. Frey (1988, pp. 50-51) did a similar survey of journals on higher education and made a similar point: “Most treatises

entirely absent from one of the most widely used student surveys currently being used to assess the quality of the undergraduate college experience. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) asks about participation in recreation and sports, but not about being a fan or spectator for college games.

Were this research about universities in any other part of the world – Europe, the Commonwealth, Asia, Latin America – the failure to take serious note of intercollegiate athletics would not be remarkable. Outside of the United States, intercollegiate athletics is nothing more than one of many student activities and has few if any of the commercial attributes of American big-time college sports. But, in light of the size and prominence of commercial sports in many American universities, this blind spot in higher education research is jarring, if not shocking. It is as if scholars of American higher education were living in a parallel universe, completely missing the reality that these universities are in the entertainment business and the fact that this business is the principal thing that most people know about their institutions. One reason scholars ignore commercial sports as a serious subject might be that they simply do not think it is important enough to worry about. An alternative explanation for the blind spot is that scholars see but choose not to study commercial sports because they believe what the mission statements say, that commercial sports is simply not a proper function of universities. That big-time college sports exists cannot be denied, this view might hold, but it is not worth discussing as part of the “real” work of universities. For scholars taking this view, spectator sports is simply not a higher education topic. It is a topic for a newspaper’s sports section. If big-time college sports belongs to the people’s university, these scholars focus only on the scholars’ university, the city of the intellect.

When scholars study aspects of big-time sports, and they do, the focus tends to be sports as a free-standing enterprise, not as a regular function of the universities that sponsor it. In economics, these studies deal with such aspects of university athletics as finances, effects of athletic success on applications for admission and charitable donations, the economic value of recruiting star players, and how conferences and the NCAA influence competitive balance among teams. Numerous studies examine the cartel-like aspects of the NCAA. In addition, some studies address such topics as the history of college sports, the psychology of fan devotion, and the cultural significance of gender roles and sports pageantry. In this book, I draw heavily from the findings of studies such as these. As interesting as they are, however, they do not embody the view that athletics is a central function of universities, or that its operation affects these central functions. Their message is that college sports stands on its own as a topic worth studying, but the activity has little to do with the other things universities do.

on academic administration or college governance make no mention of athletics.” “It is as if athletics did not exist, was not a problem, or was so unimportant that it did not deserve mention.”

The gulf that I have sketched between athletics and serious study of higher education is not absolute, to be sure. A few academic studies do treat athletics as an activity that has the potential to affect the principal work of universities. Two studies, by former Princeton president William Bowen and his coauthors, focus on highly selective institutions and the consequences of having a sizable portion of athletes in the student body. These books document that athletes, who are often given preference in admissions, tend to bring down the academic quality of these elite colleges and universities. These studies focus on the athletes themselves and their effect on the undergraduate experience at their institutions, not on the commercial enterprise and its relationship to the university's main work. To be sure, some studies, including books by Thelin (1994), Zemsky, Wegner and Massy (2005), and Weisbrod, Ballou and Asch (2008) do address, or at least note, the very topic of corporate mission that I deal with here. Interestingly, some of the books that probe most deeply into the consequences for universities of big-time athletics are those written by former university presidents. Beside Bowen's, these include books by former presidents at Michigan, Harvard, and Princeton.²⁵

The spirited criticisms that have been leveled at big-time college sports over the years carry with them the assumption that commercial sports, as practiced by American universities, is at cross-purposes with those institutions' educational objectives. Yet it is difficult to prove any conflict exists, except in the opinion of these critics. Neither the formal statements made by universities nor the scholarship produced by experts address the role – actual or desired – of commercial sports in universities. In fact, a paradoxical dual reality pervades serious discussions of the role of big-time athletics in American universities. In popular perception, it is an important part of the universities that participate. But in the intellectual world of institutional pronouncements and scholarship, big-time sports is little more than a footnote.

Decision-Making and the Booster Coalition

When considering how commercial sports fits into the broader aims of universities, it is easy to speak glibly about the university as if it were a monolithic body with a unified purpose. But, according to scholars who have studied universities as an organizational form, the university is anything but. Unlike armies and business corporations, which tend to have clear objectives and disciplined hierarchical command structures, universities feature vague missions, decentralized organizations, and weak presidents. Shortly after he was appointed president of Columbia University in 1948, Dwight D. Eisenhower discovered how much less authority his new position carried with it than his previous one, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. Meeting with Nobel Prize winning physicist I.I. Rabi for the first time, Eisenhower remarked that he was always glad to see employees of Columbia honored. The professor responded, "Mr. President,

²⁵ Duderstadt (2000), Bok (2003), and Shapiro (2005).

the faculty are not *employees* of the University – they *are* the University.”²⁶ As a consequence of their limited authority, university CEOs and their lieutenants – provost and deans – regularly suffer the indignity of having their employees refuse their legitimate requests.²⁷ This is not to suggest that presidents and provosts are without the power to nudge their institutions in one direction or the other. It is simply to say that top-down, disciplined, hierarchical control, a pillar of the modern corporation, has no real parallel in the modern research university.

This absence of chain-of-command discipline reveals itself with particular clarity when it comes to athletics. Athletic department budgets are commonly outside the purview of routine university budget deliberations. At the University of Michigan, for example, the athletic director was the only major university officer who did not make a budget presentation to the provost, the university’s chief budget officer.²⁸ In universities with big-time sports programs, many presidents learn early on that they have little authority over their celebrity coaches, and often less status. One instructive example was Duke’s new president, during his first days in office in 2004, publicly pleading with the university’s celebrated basketball coach not to take a job in professional basketball. Such “ritual humiliation,” as one Duke professor called this episode, is seldom required to clarify the relative positions of power within the university, however.²⁹ Another illustration of the limits of presidential power is a statement, remarkable for its candor, made by the president of the University of Florida in an interview with a reporter from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2009.³⁰

Q. When your athletics department has all this new ESPN money, these riches of NCAA titles, the highest-paid coaches and athletic director around, how do you keep it from spinning beyond your control?

A. I don't, I don't make any pretense about that.

²⁶ Columbia Alumni Magazine, Summer 2001, <http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:eQwt8cMWGNwJ:www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2001/Rabi.html+eisenhower+president+of+columbia+fellow+employees&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>, 1/31/10.

²⁷ Feldstein (1992, pp. 38-39) argues that university administrators not only lack power, they lack the incentive to bring about any changes that would make too many waves, or enemies.

²⁸ Private correspondence with Paul Courant, provost from 2002 to 2005. He noted that, as a practical matter, the provost dealt largely with general fund budgets. Because the hospital and most auxiliaries other than athletics depended in part on general fund revenues, the provost could learn about the operations of those units.

²⁹ Peter J. Boyer, “Big Men on Campus,” *New Yorker*, September 4, 2006.

³⁰ Interview with president of the University of Florida, J. Bernard Machen, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31, 2009.

A survey of university presidents conducted by the Knight Commission about the same time showed that this sentiment was shared widely by presidents of universities with big-time sports programs. One president who responded to the survey, not identified, stated a widely-shared but seldom articulated reality: “In terms of control over big-time college athletics, I don’t believe we have control. Show me a president who won’t meet the demands of a winning coach who has the chance to walk out the door for a higher salary someplace else.”³¹

A Peculiar Organization

The limited power of president and provost is just one of the organizational peculiarities of American universities. To understand how it is possible for a commercial entertainment enterprise to thrive inside a university, it is necessary to appreciate these peculiarities. Sociologist James Coleman wrote that the modern university differs from corporations in three ways. First, they have no corporate goal. Unlike corporations, whose focus on profits is clear, the objectives of universities are multiple and vague, as we have seen in their published mission statements. Often, the aim is no more specific than “to be the best.”³² Second, their governance is more akin to that of a community where competing interests vie to achieve their various objectives than to the neat hierarchy pictured in the corporate organization chart. Third, those who carry out the main work of the university are not employees in the traditional sense, but rather, “semi-independent professionals.”³³

Yet, as gratifying as the Columbia professor’s statements might be to the ears of faculty, limited presidential power does not necessarily imply heightened faculty control. Despite their general agreement that they *do* constitute the university’s core (and frequent assurances to that effect by top administrators), faculty in truth have little authority in university decisions outside the purely academic realm and often quite limited authority within that realm. To be sure, faculty members do sit on university athletic councils and are sent to NCAA conventions to represent, along with athletic directors, their institutions, but these forms of faculty participation in governance of athletics may be more about form than substance. For example, those appointed to oversee athletics may be athletic true-believers. Certainly the perks that often accompany an appointment as faculty athletic representative might predispose some faculty to sympathize with the athletic department. Of the 307 guests who sat in the president’s and regents’ boxes during the 2008 football season at Texas A&M, only four were listed as attending all seven home games. One of those was the faculty representative to the NCAA, and another was the chair of

³¹ David Moltz, “Powerless, or Passing the Buck?” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 27, 2009. See also, Katie Thomas, “Call to Curb Athletic Spending Strikes Some as Unrealistic,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2009.

³² See Clotfelter (1996) or Frey (1994, p. 116), who stresses the university’s “diffuse goals.”

³³Coleman (1973, p. 369).

the university's athletic council. To quote the blunt assessment in the Carnegie Commission's 1929 report, the forms of faculty oversight the study team observed mostly amounted to little more than "pseudo faculty control."³⁴ A more recent assessment comes to much the same conclusion, calling their oversight of athletic programs "ineffective," exemplified by faculty service on athletic councils that merely rubber stamp decisions made by the athletic department.³⁵ According to a recent survey of administrators and trustees, this lack of faculty authority over athletics is simply a special case of what is true more generally in university governance. Responses in that survey suggested that the vast majority of faculty governing bodies were no more than advisory or "policy influencing." Only 13% of respondents reported that their institution's faculty deliberative body was "policy making."³⁶

An episode at the University of Wisconsin's flagship campus at Madison in 2008 serves to illustrate the faculty's limited authority over athletics. The resignation by one of the faculty members of the university's athletic board brought to light several instances in which that board had been entirely bypassed in major decisions concerning the university's athletic department. Although the university's written handbook of faculty policies and procedures called for the athletic board to participate actively in searches and screening to hire head coaches and senior athletic department administrators, the board had been given just two hours' notice before the university announced the hiring of a new head football coach. Nor had the board been involved during the university's contract negotiations with the new Big Ten Network, including the question of how the revenues would be distributed within the university.³⁷

The Berkeley faculty's revolt, despite its air of confrontation, also illustrates the faculty's lack of clout. When the Berkeley faculty rose up in 2009, indignant about the size of subsidies going to the university's athletic department, the most severe action their faculty senate could take was to *recommend* that the chancellor begin to reduce those deficits. The faculty, in short,

³⁴ Savage (1929 p. 78).

³⁵ Frey (1987, p. 53) writes: "Their influence is negligible and few care to take the time and energy to be concerned with a program that is of low priority and tainted ethical quality. About the best any institution can do is to identify the few faculty who seem to be 'local' in their orientation and 'fans' of athletic programs. These persons then serve on the athletic councils; they do not get in the way, and they are there when you need them for an *ex post facto* affirmation of a decision already made."

³⁶ Scott Jaschik, "The Trustee-Faculty Relationship," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 25, 2010.

³⁷ The appointment in question was the naming of a new head football coach in 2005 by the athletic director and former head football coach in 2005. The negotiations concerning the Big Ten Network occurred in 2007. In an open letter to the university chancellor, history professor Jeremi Suri explained his decision to resign by saying, "I am now convinced that the Athletic Board is only promoting the agenda of a small group of stakeholders." Todd Finkelmeyer, "Board Members Say Suri's Wrong about Sports Oversight; Suri Calls UW Athletic Board a Rubber Stamp," *The Capital Times*, October 3, 2008; Todd Finkelmeyer, "Athletic Board: Rubber Stamp or Independent Voice?" *The Capital Times*, October 24, 2009; Steven Underwood and Donald Down, "UW's Athletic Board is Not a Rubber Stamp," *The Capital Times*, November 2, 2008.

were even less in charge of the athletic enterprise than was the chancellor.³⁸ It was much the same story a few months later at Ohio University, when its faculty senate passed what amounted to an equally toothless resolution decrying subsidies to its athletics department.³⁹

There can be no more blunt an assertion of the autonomy of the athletic enterprise than this one by a famous basketball coach of the 1980s:

We're not even really part of the school anymore, anyway. I work for the N.C. State Athletic Association. That has nothing to do with the university. Our funding is totally independent. You think the chancellor is going to tell me what to do? Who to take into school or not take into school? I doubt it. I'm paid to win games. If I say a kid can help me win, I'll get him. It's the same at 99 percent of the places in the country.⁴⁰

According to Coleman, the university's lack of a corporate goal and decentralized power structure makes it "permeable," easily penetrated by activities that had not been part of the European universities upon which the American ones were modeled. Examples of such new activities that he cited in his 1973 essay included linear accelerators, adult education, ROTC, vocational training, community action and urban redevelopment programs, and policy related research, few of which would raise an eyebrow today.⁴¹ Although Coleman made no reference to intercollegiate sports in the essay (adhering to the scholarly tradition of silence on athletics!), his argument applies with equal or greater force for an activity like commercial sports. Since the university had no clearly defined purpose, why couldn't that be part of it? Indeed, one scholar has argued that big-time sports became attached to American colleges and universities in the first place because entrepreneurial college presidents desperately needed outside financial support to make a go of it in America's highly decentralized and competitive higher education market.⁴² Compared to European universities, which relied largely on government largess, American colleges and universities were more numerous and less financially secure. This organizational portrait explains both the outward search for recognition and the opportunity inside to establish a network of supporters.

³⁸ In fact, few faculty members seem bothered by this lack of clout. According to Weick (1984, p. 278), most faculty are "loners," who resist authority from above and welcome the university's relative inattention to coordination and control."

³⁹ David Moltz, "Seething Over Sports Subsidies," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 20, 2010 and "A Sense of the Senate Resolution on the Sustainability of Intercollegiate Athletics," resolution approved by the Ohio University Faculty Senate, May 17, 2010.

⁴⁰ Malcolm Moran, "Backtalk; Smart Enough to Know Better, Funny Enough Not to Care," *New York Times*, May 2, 1993.

⁴¹ Coleman (1973, p. 360).

⁴² Chu (1989, p. 17).

Boosters

Inside the university, the lack of strong hierarchical control allows for the growth of semi-autonomous fiefdoms, a condition to some extent formalized by the popular “every tub on its own bottom” approach to university budgeting. As every university administrator knows, budgetary autonomy often leads to jurisdictional autonomy, adding to the decentralization, or diffusion, of authority under the university umbrella. As one of the operational units inside the university’s decentralized confederation, the big-time athletic department has become unusually autonomous. The reluctance of the academic side to subsidize its operation only strengthens that autonomy.

Fortunately for the athletic programs, since the dawn of big-time college sports, groups of enthusiasts have tended to cluster on the university’s periphery to lend their support. In his blistering 1922 critique of universities, *The Goose-Step*, Upton Sinclair used the term “rah-rah boys” to refer to unrestrained alumni supporters who backed college athletic programs. They raised money to augment the salaries of coaches or scouted for talented athletes to recruit, often paying them under the table after they enrolled.⁴³ More recently, sociologist James Frey labeled such supporters the “booster coalition.” Not simply a handful of sports enthusiasts who show up at games, this coalition represents an entrenched, well-connected axis of power quite outside the university’s formal decision-making structure. Dominated by successful businessmen, this group differs in ideology and temperament from those who run the rest of the university. According to Frey, they “are used to getting what they want.” They pressure universities to select athletic directors who are ideologically in tune with their own predilections.⁴⁴ A fact consistent with this portrait is a survey showing that a hugely disproportionate share of CEOs played intercollegiate sports as college students.⁴⁵ Owing to their political and financial wherewithal, Frey argues, the members of this coalition are able to exert influence on regents or trustees. Their efforts allow the athletic department to do what it needs to do to win games and, in so doing, occasionally deviate from traditional university values or even violate rules.⁴⁶

It is not hard to find anecdotal evidence that boosters exist, or that their involvement sometimes results in rules violations. Not only did Upton Sinclair complain about them, they were the subject of sustained criticism in the Carnegie Commission’s 1929 report. Boosters were

⁴³ Sinclair (1922, pp. 370-372).

⁴⁴ Frey (1985, p. 119).

⁴⁵ A survey described by Boone et al. (2001) showed that over a third of CEOs surveyed had played an intercollegiate sport, compared to just 2-3% of all undergraduates.

⁴⁶ Frey (1994, pp. 110, 119).

implicated in some of the 20th century's most notorious abuses, including the outright payment of football players at SMU.⁴⁷ In recent years, boosters – often in their roles as alumni, trustees, or advisory board members – have publicly called upon their universities to fire coaches seen as unsuccessful. For example, an alumnus of the University of Washington offered scholarships of \$100,000 each if the president would fire the university's athletic director and head football coach.⁴⁸ At Florida State, the chairman of the board of trustees told a reporter it was time for the university to get rid of their venerable football coach, whose success on the field had waned.⁴⁹ At Texas Tech, administrators had to soothe the feelings of alumni who objected to the firing of its winning football coach, who had been found to have physically abused players.⁵⁰ And at N.C. State, a new acting provost began his assignment by dealing with a raft of emails from alumni and other fans, calling on him to fire what was seen as an underperforming athletic director.⁵¹

If this dark picture of booster influence is accurate, it would explain a lot of the aspects of big-time sports that have drawn criticism over the years, as well as the consistent failure of attempts to reform the system. It would explain, for example, the persistence with which episodes of recruiting violations come to light, often involving attempts by boosters to compensate recruits, players, or their families. It would help to explain the extraordinary success of fundraising by athletic departments. It would go a long way in explaining the power of big-time athletic departments to chart its own way without undue interference by academic

⁴⁷ When SMU coach put out a full page ad thanking 110 people for support, there was no official contribution listed for over half of them. Trustee and former Texas governor William Clements in 1985 made clear he wanted payments to players continued (Byers 1995, pp. 22, 27).

⁴⁸ Paul Fain, "Booster Offered U. of Washington \$200,000 to Fire Coach and Athletics Director," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 10, 2008.

⁴⁹ Doug Lederman, "A Trustee Calls the Plays," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 7, 2009. The chairman of the board of trustees said, "I do appreciate what he's done for us....But I think the record will show that the Seminole Nation has been more than patient. We have been in a decline not for a year or two or three but I think we're coming up on seven or eight. I think enough is enough." // Richard T. Legon, president of the ABG Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities: "if intercollegiate athletics is going to be seen as part of the mainstream element of an institution, then boards, and individual trustees, need to recognize that they have no more role in calling the shots in intercollegiate athletics than they might if they have a problem with a dean."

⁵⁰ Kathryn Masterson, "Texas Tech Reaches Out to Alumni Who Are Upset About Coach's Firing," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 2010.

Another display of fan and stakeholder wrath occurred at Indiana University, following President Miles Brand firing of basketball coach Bobby Knight. Angry fans marched on Brand's house while police in riot gear stood by; a student whose complaint against Knight was the final precipitating factor: demonstrators handed out flyers with his picture and the caption, "Wanted. Dead." James C. McKinley, Jr., "College Basketball; At Indiana, Players Dig in Over Firing of Knight," *New York Times*, September 12, 2000.

⁵¹ "Fowler's Exit from N.C. State Linked to E-mails," *Raleigh News and Observer*, June 6, 2010.

administrators. Finally, it would be helpful in understanding the commercial orientation of big-time athletics itself. If the booster coalition is dominated by those who have been successful in the business world, one would not be surprised to discover among them a willingness to take advantage of opportunities to raise even more money for the athletic enterprise.

Proof that this story is anything more than a conspiracy theory cooked up by faculty is hard to come by. I adopted the more modest aim to look for evidence that would at least be consistent with the hypothesis. I used publicly available data on political party registration to test two of the theory's implications – first, that boosters are ideologically distinct from others who lead or teach in the university, and second, that they have more in common with members of the athletic department than with others associated with the university. I found evidence to support the first, but not the second.

Drawing on painstaking Web research by a research assistant, I used information on party registration to compare members of booster organizations with coaches and senior administrators in athletic departments, and also with representatives of other groups of actors in the university, including administrators, trustees, and faculty. I wanted to find out if the patterns of political party registration for boosters are similar to those of the athletic department and different from those of other university groups of stakeholders. And, on the assumption that such coalitions ought to be strongest in universities with big-time athletics, I sought to see if any differences were greatest in universities that compete at the highest level. Ideally, one would prefer to compare universities with big-time sports (those in the FBS) with otherwise similar universities not in Division I at all, but the scarcity of the latter made it necessary to settle for a comparison of the big to the super-big. Selecting pairs of universities by state that were both private or public and that were as close as possible in size, I compared FBS universities like Syracuse, the University of Connecticut, and Colorado State to non-FBS universities like St. Johns, Central Connecticut State, and the University of Northern Colorado.⁵²

To represent the university stakeholder groups besides boosters, I chose individuals from four categories: business and finance administrators, trustees, faculty in economics, and coaches and administrators in athletics. Business and finance administrators were chosen because their jobs are similar to those in the athletic department. I chose faculty in economics because nearly every university has such a department and those departments tend to be larger than average. Previous research supports the common perception that university faculty have liberal leanings. While this generalization applies to economics, the leftward leanings of economists tend to be less pronounced than those of faculty in a number of other disciplines.⁵³ In any case, the political

⁵² For a complete list of the institutions used and a description of the method, see the Appendix.

⁵³ For comparisons of the political leanings of faculty in various departments, see, for example, Bill Harbaugh, "Political Diversity at UO," unpublished manuscript, Department of Economics, University of Oregon, <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~klesh/DS.pdf>, 11/24/08 or Daniel B. Klein and Charlotta Stern, "How Politically

leanings of economists are not intended to represent those of all faculty, but rather to illustrate differences across universities. The broader aim was to see if there were any discernible differences between universities with big-time sports programs and those with more modest programs.

Using university websites and other Web-based data sources to identify individuals in the various groups, together with data on party registration available on the Web for a number of states, we tried to identify the party designation for up to 100 individuals associated with each of 30 universities in nine states.⁵⁴ For each category of stakeholder and both types of universities, I calculated the percentage of Republicans among those indicating either of the two major parties, statistically controlling for state, university enrollment, and whether the university was public or private. Thus the calculations correct for each state's general political leanings. Of the five groups of employees and stakeholders, economics faculty members were the least likely to be registered Republicans, but they were similarly inclined in both types of universities, with 32% of them registered as Republican in both. In the non-FBS universities, the four remaining stakeholder groups were quite similar in party registration, with average Republican percentages clumped between 51 and 52%. In the FBS universities, however, boosters stood out, with 71% being registered Republican, significantly higher than the 51% of boosters in the non-FBS universities so registered. However, coaches and athletic department administrators at the FBS universities did not follow suit: their Republican share was virtually identical to those in non-FBS athletic departments.⁵⁵

This statistical exercise thus offers only partial support for the booster coalition hypothesis. Although boosters and athletic department leaders did not show the similarity suggested by that theory, boosters who were associated with big-time programs did conform in one measurable respect to the theory's stereotype that boosters have experiences and attitudes distinct from those of other university stakeholders. Judging only from their party preferences, the boosters I identified were ideologically distinct from other groups of employees and stakeholders, and they were distinct from boosters associated with less competitive athletic

Diverse are the Social Sciences and Humanities? Survey Evidence from Six Fields," unpublished manuscript, 2004?, <http://lsb.scu.edu/~dklein/survey/survey.htm>, 11/24/08, who used surveys of faculty in six disciplines and found that those who vote Republican as a percentage of those voting Republican or Democratic ranged from 3% for anthropology and sociology to 25% for economics.

⁵⁴ The sample of institutions included 15 universities in the FBS and an equal number, matched by state, size, and sector, in some other subdivision of Division I. Of the 2,220 individuals identified, 1,809 could be located on state registration rolls, 1,415 indicated some political affiliation, and 1,300 registered as either Republican or Democrat.

⁵⁵ As shown in Appendix Table 2A.1, the only difference between FBS and other Division I institutions that was statistically significant was that for boosters.

programs. They were, in a word, conservative. These findings seem fully consistent with the conclusion drawn by one reformist observer of college sports in the 1960s:

The conservatism that engulfs the American sporting scene to this day stems in no small measure from the alumni groups that control intercollegiate athletic programs throughout the country. Not surprisingly, alumni who have the time, finances, and inclination to involve themselves in, and contribute to the financing of, a professionalized athletic program for college students are usually conservative men.⁵⁶

Two enterprises

Inside the walls of universities with big-time athletics programs, two distinct administrative structures coexist. Not only do they differ in function – academic and athletic – they also differ in organizational structure and professional culture. As organizations, these big-time athletic departments have little in common with the academic side of the universities that contain them. In clear contrast to the decentralization and personal autonomy of the academic side, athletic departments are organized as strict hierarchies, reflecting traditions both corporate and military. Former Michigan president James Duderstadt notes the differences in cultures and adherence to rules, observing that the athletic department’s dictatorial power is “alien to the academy.”⁵⁷

This cultural divide is especially apparent in the organization of teams. In sharp contrast to those who played on the student-run teams of the 19th century, the students wearing the football or basketball uniforms of one of today’s big-time sports programs participate as soldiers in a tightly controlled platoon, under the strict oversight of a ruling commanding officer and his lieutenants. One ethnographic study of a big-time basketball team documented the dominant and paternal position of the head coach, which allowed him to wield absolute power over the lives of his players. For their part, his players showed loyalty comparable to troops in combat or members of religious cults.⁵⁸

To be sure, the business side of the university – the finance, human resources, and service provision functions – bears many similarities to conventional corporations in its hierarchical organization chart, but most of the academic side of the institution does not. On the academic side, successful university leadership becomes an exercise in persuasion rather than in top-down command and control. This communitarian style of decision-making also draws nourishment

⁵⁶ Scott (1971, pp. 187-188).

⁵⁷ Duderstadt (2000, pp. 87-88).

⁵⁸ Adler and Adler (1988).

ideologically as well from the traditional emphasis that faculty, in their roles as teachers and department members, place on the values of creativity and independence of thought.

A second way in which these athletics departments differ from most other units in their respective universities is in their highly developed commercial orientation and businesslike operation. Big-time athletic departments face a market test to a degree few other units at a university do, with the possible exception of university medical centers. Their financial well-being depends upon attracting paying customers. They must take seriously the principles of modern marketing and use its techniques. They must be sophisticated in their interactions with television and other media, both in trumpeting their achievements and avoiding unfavorable publicity. And, like for-profit business enterprises that compete in the marketplace, they must live in an uncertain world where the possibility that expenses will exceed revenues is an ever-present reality. To be sure, the big-time athletics department is not the only merchant doing business within an otherwise sacred temple of learning. As former Harvard president Derek Bok argued in his book *Universities in the Marketplace*, commercialization has also insinuated itself into scientific research and specialized course offerings. And managing the endowment is certainly a highly commercialized function as well, although this function is often farmed out or placed in a separate nonprofit entity. But it seems fair to conclude that no other unit in American universities more closely resembles a private for-profit firm than the big-time athletic department.

Yet the thing that sets apart the commercialism of the big-time athletics department is the particular industry with which it has most in common – the entertainment industry. Were it an independent company and not a department inside a large university, a big-time athletics department would readily be classified by Commerce Department statisticians to be part of the entertainment industry, alongside professional sports teams. The games played by the football and basketball teams of a big-time program are broadcast widely and frequently on television, lifting their notoriety from the local to the regional to the national. Their star players, some of them still teenagers, are routinely quoted in print media and interviewed on radio and television. Their biggest stars, however, are the head coaches of football and men's basketball, whose prominence easily surpass that of any other university employee. And, like other stars in the entertainment industry, these head coaches enjoy incomes that put them on a level matched by few others in higher education.

The Actual Business of Universities

Every university with a big-time sports program has an athletic department to operate that program and a group of stakeholders to insure continued university commitment to its operation. This coalition of stakeholders must include trustees or their equivalent, but at its core are athletic boosters dedicated to the cause of intercollegiate competition. No matter how much these universities emphasize high-quality research or excellence in teaching, they make it an

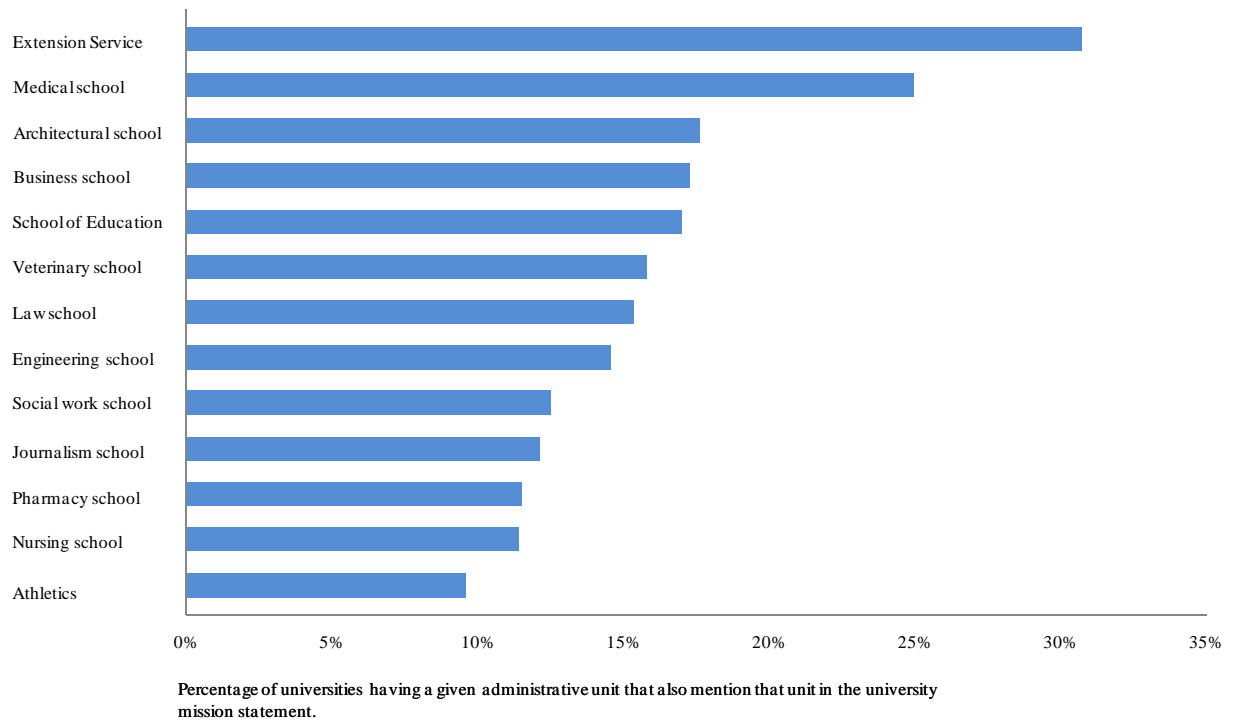
institutional priority to be competitive, at some acceptable level, in intercollegiate athletics. This is because big-time sports is not just a means to an end. For university decision-makers, being competitive is an end in itself. No person can survive as president or chancellor at one of these universities who does not accept this imperative. This fact is captured in the quip attributed to the University of California's Clark Kerr, that the job of chancellor "had come to be defined as providing parking for the faculty, sex for the students, and athletics for the alumni."⁵⁹ In order to be successful in this athletic/entertainment enterprise, big-time sports universities turn to professionals to run the enterprise. This group of professionals has expertise that is quite distinct from that required to run the academic side of the university. The academic and athletic enterprises also differ in organizational style, one having the decentralized, loosely organized structure inherited from the medieval university, the other having the tightly-managed chain of command of the military battalion.

Despite the preponderant share of attention garnered by their big-time sports programs, the universities that run them are reluctant to admit that they play any significant role. Universities with big-time programs are less likely to mention athletics in their formal mission statements than they are to mention any comparably sized subunit, such as professional schools or the extension service, and are much less likely to mention athletics than they are teaching, research, or service. Similarly, scholars of higher education have a blind spot where it comes to the role of commercial athletics. Although big-time sports is studied as an activity on its own terms, it is seldom studied as an issue of higher education.

This blind spot has the appearance of a parallel universe. Those on the academic side of universities seem not to recognize athletics as a significant part of universities, but those outside of universities, as we will see in the next chapter, see athletics as the preponderant manifestation of universities. One explanation for this disconnect is that, for intellectuals, athletics is not part of what is significant about universities, or at least it *should not be*. By the same token, universities, or at least the committees that write mission statements, could believe that athletics really is not part of their university's mission, or not important enough to merit any mention. An alternative, and less flattering, explanation is that university mission statements were never meant to be accurate, that they should be judged by the same standards as commercial advertising, wherein extravagant claims in the category of "puffery" are not required to be literally true. But ignoring athletics as a serious topic of higher education is not only inconsistent with the best traditions of academic inquiry, it is also unhelpful. If athletics is important enough to be a perennial problem in American higher education, it is important enough to receive serious attention.

⁵⁹ 1957 remark, quoted by *Time* and *Playboy*. UC Berkeley News, on the death of Clark Kerr. http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:ZJ3-orn0iFwJ:berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/12/02_kerr.shtml+clark+kerr+the+uses+of+the+university+athletics&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us, 1/9/10.

Figure 2.1 Administrative Units Mentioned in Mission Statements



Source: Mission statements posted on the Web, May 2008, 52 universities with big-time sports.

