

## 4: INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

Well-run intercollegiate athletics programs offer some clear benefits to colleges and universities, and their students. They can provide growth opportunities for individual student athletes, build cohesiveness and a sense of community within the student body, and engage alumni and other constituencies in the life of the institution beyond just athletics. They present opportunities to introduce new audiences to the institution's academic offerings and achievements that those audiences might otherwise be unaware of. Some colleges and universities have intentionally invested in athletics programs to refresh their institutional brand.

But intercollegiate athletics can also present problems and challenges across almost all sectors of institutional life, in a myriad of ways. Very few institutions gain net revenue from the overall effort, and the expenses related to college sports—often quite significant—can directly undercut any initiatives to contain costs, creating not only financial but public relations problems. At the same time, court decisions and other pending issues are having a pronounced impact on how colleges and universities fund their sports programs. Recent legislation in Virginia, for example, limits the percentage of athletic program budgets that can be paid for through mandatory student fees. In addition, intercollegiate athletics programs bring risks, including poor academic performance, breaches in academic integrity, concussions and other injuries, and sexual assaults, among others.

For their part, boards remain among many institutions' biggest boosters of intercollegiate athletics programs. AGB has encouraged board members to understand their appropriate fiduciary role in college sports. The pressure to field winning teams in an environment of overall disruption to the higher education sector creates challenges that presidents and boards must address. The president and board should carefully review the athletic program's impact on their institution's mission and budget, student well-being, and other important considerations.

In its discussion of the issue, AGB's Council of Presidents made the following recommendations:

### *For Presidents*

- Presidents should consider whether, and to what degree, the institution's athletics programs align with its mission.
- Presidents must also stay on top of the financial challenges that intercollegiate athletics programs raise. They must grapple with how to obtain and sustain resources for their athletics teams to compete regionally and nationally, as expenditures on coaches' salaries, equipment, and facilities continue to skyrocket. At a time when the business model is under such stress, they can't expect resources to keep pace, nor can they simply raise student fees to cover their costs—a practice that is increasingly controversial.
- Presidents must also be aware of growing legal challenges related to intercollegiate athletics, such as the O'Bannon case (an antitrust lawsuit filed against the National Collegiate Athletic Association that challenged the use of images of former athletes for commercial purposes), class-action suits regarding concussions, and investigations into sexual assaults by athletes conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.
- Presidents should view athletics as one part of a student-centered environment. A number of institutions have been making a conscious and significant effort to improve the graduation and retention rates of student athletes. They've also been putting in place other policies, for example, requiring athletes to commit to a certain number of hours of community service in order to play.

- Presidents can also emphasize and support the role that athletics programs, whether intercollegiate or intramural, should play as educational vehicles for students. For example, one president at the meeting spoke of how sports can be integral to creating vital and unparalleled leadership and growth opportunities for student-athletes. Another president described how institutions can use athletics to help students build career paths in fields like orthopedic medicine and kinesiology. Colleges and universities can also help prepare students to be professional athletes, if they choose such a path, through programs on personal financial planning and other relevant topics.

### *For Presidents and Their Boards*

- Chief executives should educate and inform their boards about issues concerning intercollegiate athletics at their institutions and make sure that they are aware of their responsibilities in this arena. For example, one president at the meeting described how his university's board established an athletics committee in order to be appropriately involved. As the "AGB Statement on Board Responsibilities for Intercollegiate Athletics" states, "The governing board is ultimately accountable for athletics policy and oversight and should fulfill this fiduciary responsibility." It goes on to say, "Effective oversight requires that the board be informed about the risks and challenges of intercollegiate athletics programs and engage in questions of policy concerning intercollegiate athletics."
- Boards should ensure that the institution's mission steers its intercollegiate athletics programs, rather than vice versa, and that those programs are integrated appropriately into the culture and structure of the institution.
- The chief executive should provide the board with relevant financial information concerning intercollegiate athletics, along with indicators of the academic progress of student athletes and student well-being.
- Boards should also be informed about whether the institution is in compliance with the regulations of the various athletic conferences and the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and annually certify that it is.

#### *Related Resources*

- John T. Casteen, "What Does HB 1897 Mean for Athletics?" (*Trusteeship*, July/August 2016).
- John T. Casteen and Richard D. Legon, "Governance and Intercollegiate Athletics: Boards Must Know the Score" (*Trusteeship*, November/December 2012).
- "Trust, Accountability, and Integrity: Board Responsibility for Intercollegiate Athletics" (AGB, 2011).
- "AGB Statement on Board Responsibilities for Intercollegiate Athletics" (AGB, 2009).