

# Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics

Executive Summary

## Faculty Perceptions of Intercollegiate Athletics Survey

Prepared for the Knight Commission's  
Faculty Summit  
on Intercollegiate Athletics

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## Introduction

In a national survey of more than 2,000 faculty members at universities with the country's most visible athletic programs, a striking number of professors say they don't know about and are disconnected from issues facing college sports. More than a third say they don't know about many athletics program policies and practices, including the financial underpinnings of their campuses' athletics programs. Furthermore, more than a third have no opinion about concerns raised by national faculty athletics reform groups. The largest portion of faculty (41 percent) believe faculty governance roles on campus associated with the oversight of intercollegiate athletics are ill defined, and most believe those roles are not particularly meaningful. On other issues, faculty are often equally divided between those who are satisfied with the conduct of their institution's intercollegiate athletics programs and those who are not.

Faculty members do tend to agree on several key points:

- Athletics decisions on campus are being driven by the demands of the entertainment industry.
- Faculty members are dissatisfied with their roles in athletics governance on campus, although more of them are satisfied with presidential oversight of athletics on their own campuses.
- Salaries paid to head football and basketball coaches are excessive, and the financial needs of athletics get higher priority than academic needs. Still, half of the respondents also think athletics success results in financial gains to campus initiatives unrelated to sports.
- Professors have similar levels of satisfaction with the academic performance of students in general and athletes in sports other than football and basketball. However, they are significantly less satisfied with the academic performance of football and basketball players. They believe athletes are more burdened than other students by demands on their out-of-class time.
- Faculty members are satisfied with the practice of awarding scholarships based on athletics ability, and believe that scholarships for basketball and football athletes may not compensate them fairly for their services.

## Background

In 1989, the trustees of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation were concerned that highly visible athletics scandals threatened the integrity of higher education. They formed the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics to develop and win acceptance of realistic reforms that would close the widening chasm between higher education's ideals and big-time college sports.

In its 1991 and 2001 reports, the Knight Commission called on university faculties to join other members of the academic community to act together to restore the balance of athletics and academics on campus. In meetings since that time, the Knight Commission has heard testimony from

professors involved in campus leadership, athletics governance, and athletics reform groups such as the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics and the Drake Group.

Following the Knight Commission's Summit on the Collegiate Athlete Experience in 2006, members of campus reform groups approached the Knight Commission to propose a summit on the role of the faculty in maintaining a healthy relationship between academics and athletics on campus. The commission agreed to host such a summit.

In preparation for the Faculty Summit, the Knight Commission asked Dr. Janet H. Lawrence, an associate professor at the University of Michigan's

Center for Postsecondary and Higher Education, to conduct a national survey of faculty members at NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (formerly Division I-A) universities. The purpose was to learn how faculty members who are most likely to have knowledge about athletics issues through university governance involvement, or faculty who are most likely to interact with athletes in the classroom, perceive a range of athletics issues. The findings are to be used as background for discussions at the summit as well as for further conversation that may follow within athletic conferences and on individual campuses. The survey was designed to answer the following questions:

- How do faculty perceive intercollegiate athletics on their campuses?
- How satisfied are they with the governance, academics and financial aspects of intercollegiate athletics?
- What most concerns them about intercollegiate athletics?
- What priority do they think campus faculty governance groups should give to intercollegiate athletics?

The survey took into account how perceptions might be affected by differences in faculty members' career experiences, campus climate, athletics success, and athletes' academic success. Finally, the study looked at the likelihood of individual professors agreeing to get involved in solving problems in intercollegiate athletics on their own campuses and whether they believed such activity would be effective.

## Survey Methodology

The survey was sent to 13,604 faculty members at 23 institutions in the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision (formerly known as Division I-A).

Two institutions were randomly selected from each of the eleven Football Bowl Subdivision conferences and one was chosen from the institutions not affiliated with any conference. Among those surveyed were 1) faculty currently involved in university governance (e.g., faculty senates); 2) faculty in roles associated with intercollegiate athletics oversight (e.g., faculty athletics representatives, members of campus athletics advisory boards); and, 3) tenured or tenure track faculty who teach undergraduates and, as a result, have a high probability of interacting with athletes in the classroom. Researchers received 3,005 responses from professors at all 23 institutions surveyed. However, the final sample used in the analysis consisted of 2,071 responses after adjusting for those who did not fully complete the survey, faculty currently on sabbatical, emeritus faculty, non-tenure track faculty, and administrators inadvertently included.

The sample design did not attempt to approximate a random sample of faculty that could be generalized with a margin of error since it was important to focus on faculty

with governance involvement. Of this purposive sample, more than three-quarters (78 percent) are involved in faculty governance at some level and 14 percent of this group has experience with athletics governance. Only 22 percent of the respondents report no current involvement in either athletics or campus-wide governance.

## Survey Results

*The overarching finding is: A striking number of professors say they don't know about and are disconnected from issues facing college sports. It's all the more striking because the survey sample included faculty involved in governance or undergraduate teaching—those more likely to be informed about these issues.*

*The workings of our athletic department are fairly opaque from the perspective of the rank and file faculty and staff. I suspect the department is doing a better job of academic oversight than most of the campus realizes. Unfortunately, stereotypes and misconceptions abound. The budget process is completely obscure, and that adds to the confusion.*

—Survey Respondent

More than a third of faculty members are unfamiliar with select policies and practices pertaining to athletics, the financial underpinnings of athletics on campus, or concerns raised by national faculty athletics reform groups. Perhaps as a result, this lack of information results in large segments of faculty members responding that they have no opinion about a number of academic, governance and financial issues. Those who say they are informed about such operations are divided among those who are satisfied with the conduct of intercollegiate athletics on their campus and those who are not. The large segment of uninformed faculty is particularly noteworthy because the sample was designed to include faculty involved in governance or undergraduate teaching and, as a result, would seem more likely than a randomly drawn sample of university faculty to be informed about these issues.

Concerning academic issues, more than half (53 percent) have no opinion about their satisfaction with coaches' roles in the admissions process; nearly half (49 percent) do not know if a faculty committee on campus regularly monitors the educational soundness of athletes' programs of study; 40 percent have no opinion about the academic standards on their campus that guide admissions decisions for athletes in football and basketball, and a similar portion (38 percent) have no opinion about the attention given by campus faculty governance groups to the quality of athletes' educational experiences.

Regarding finances, 39 percent of faculty do not know if athletics programs on their own campuses are subsidized by institutional general funds. Also, nearly a third (31 percent) offer no opinion on whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the use of general funds to subsidize athletics on their campus—likely the result of a lack of information on which to base an opinion.

More than a third have no opinion about the types of roles faculty members play in the

governance of intercollegiate athletics (35 percent) and the range of faculty perspectives considered by central administrators when institutional positions on athletics are formulated (34 percent).

While perceptions about and satisfaction with the conduct of intercollegiate athletics are mixed among faculty who do have knowledge of athletics operations, professors generally share the same beliefs about several key issues involving governance, academics, athlete welfare and finances. These shared beliefs include the following:

*Faculty input is “superficial”—  
the Faculty Athletic Committee is  
“controlled” by athletic  
administration. I know —  
I sat on it...*

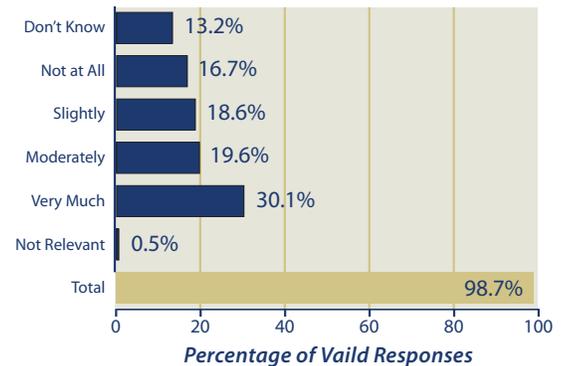
—Survey Respondent

## Governance

*1. Faculty members say they believe intercollegiate athletics is an auxiliary service and decisions are driven by the demands of the entertainment industry.*

More than six in 10 (62 percent) say that intercollegiate athletics is structurally separate from the academic part of their university, and half say that decisions about the athletics program are driven by the entertainment industry with minimal regard for their university's academic mission.

*Decisions about intercollegiate athletics on my campus are driven by the priorities of an entertainment industry that is not invested in my university's academic mission.*



*2. Although faculty are more satisfied than not with their respective president's oversight of athletics, they are generally dissatisfied with their roles in faculty athletics governance and the consideration of faculty input on athletics decisions. However, when asked to prioritize issues for campus faculty governance groups, intercollegiate athletics ranks very low.*

Faculty members are more satisfied (46 percent) than not (28 percent) with their respective president's oversight of intercollegiate athletics. But more faculty (36 percent) than not (28 percent) are dissatisfied with faculty athletics governance roles. More specifically, the largest portion of the faculty (41 percent) believe faculty governance roles associated with the oversight of athletics on campus are ill defined; 32 percent disagree with that statement and 26 percent do not know. Even a third of those with athletics governance experience (35 percent) believe these roles are ill defined. Further, professors are generally dissatisfied with the extent to which faculty input is considered when athletics decisions are made, and are more dissatisfied (44 percent) than not (25 percent) with the range of faculty perspectives considered by administrators when athletics positions are formulated. Further, more respondents (47 percent) than not (28 percent)

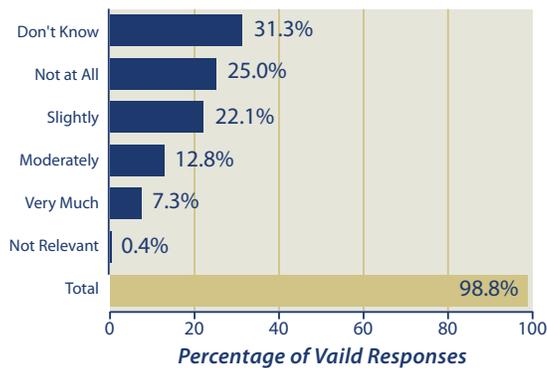
believe faculty members are interested in intercollegiate governance issues on their campus. However, they rank intercollegiate athletics second to last, just above Greek life, in a list of 13 priorities for campus faculty governance groups.

*3. Faculty members involved in athletics governance are more positive about all aspects of intercollegiate athletics than those who are not involved.*

### Faculty Ranking of Priorities for Campus Faculty Governance Groups

1. Resources for Research (e.g., quality of labs, administrative support, institutional grants)
2. Graduate Programs (e.g., curriculum rigor, resources)
3. Undergraduate Majors (e.g., curriculum rigor, resources)
4. Faculty Salaries and Benefits (e.g., salary compression, health benefits)
5. Financial Health of Institution (e.g., revenue levels, deferred maintenance)
6. Faculty Personnel Policies (e.g., use of non-tenure track faculty, promotion and tenure)
7. Access to and Affordability of Undergraduate Education (e.g., institutional financial aid, outreach to students and families)
8. Undergraduate Educational Policies (e.g., admission standards, advising, missed class time)
9. Racial Equity (e.g., in employment, admissions)
10. Gender Equity (e.g., in employment, admissions)
11. Commercialization of Research (e.g., intellectual property, joint ventures with private business)
12. Intercollegiate Athletics (e.g., student-athlete well-being, finance)
13. Greek Life (e.g., initiation activities, Town Gown relationships)

### Institution-level decisions about intercollegiate athletics are typically made by administrators who consult with faculty governance groups.



## Academics and Athlete Welfare

*1. Faculty believe athletes are motivated to earn their degrees and are academically prepared to keep pace with other students. Faculty have similar levels of satisfaction with the academic performance of students in general and athletes participating in sports other than football and basketball. However, they are significantly less satisfied with the academic performance of football and basketball players. At the same time, they recognize that athletes have less discretionary time than non-athletes.*

A majority of faculty members (61 percent) believe that athletes are motivated to earn their degrees and are academically prepared to keep pace with the other students in their classes. Respondents rate their satisfaction with the academic integrity and performance of athletes and other students at similar levels, although they are significantly less satisfied with the academic performance of football and basketball athletes. Three-quarters of those surveyed believe athletes are more burdened than other students because of the demands on their out-of-class time, and the majority believe that athletes are not engaged in other campus activities.

*2. While most faculty members believe that academic standards do not need to be compromised to achieve athletics success, nearly a third disagree.*

While faculty acknowledge that athletes are more burdened than other students, half say they believe that academic standards do not need to be lowered to achieve athletics success. However, nearly a third (32 percent) of those surveyed believe that some compromises with academic standards must be made to achieve athletics success in football and basketball.

*Athletics is no longer an integral part of the university. It is a stand-alone profit center. TV contracts are set up to maximize revenues, not to minimize the impact on the athletes' academic experience.*

—Survey Respondent

*3. Academic concerns appear to motivate faculty to join campus efforts aimed at addressing those issues.*

Faculty who are personally most concerned about the academic aspects of intercollegiate athletics are likely to join campus activities designed to ameliorate problems. Among those who think that the chances their efforts will result in meaningful campus change are greater than 50/50, the largest number said academic issues are of most concern to them. In particular, professors who are concerned about the quality of athletes' educational experiences and their academic outcomes are the most optimistic about their chances for success.

## Finances

*1. Three in four faculty members say salaries paid to their schools' head football and basketball coaches are excessive. The majority believe athletics financial needs get higher priority than academic needs; however, half of those surveyed also think athletics*

*success results in financial gains to campus initiatives unrelated to sports.*

Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of faculty believe salaries paid to head football and basketball coaches on their campuses are excessive. However, with regard to finances overall, faculty members see intercollegiate athletics as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they note the high costs associated with intercollegiate athletics, and the majority of them believe their institutions prioritize construction of state-of-the-art athletic facilities over capital projects for academic departments. On the other hand, half think the success of intercollegiate athletics fosters alumni and corporate giving to campus initiatives outside of athletics.

*2. More than half of faculty members are satisfied with the practice of awarding*

*scholarships based on athletic ability, and more faculty than not believe scholarships for basketball and football athletes may not fairly compensate them for their services.*

More than half of faculty (53 percent) are satisfied with the practice of awarding scholarships based on athletics ability, nearly a third (31 percent) are not, and 15 percent have no opinion.

Also, 45 percent of respondents do not believe or only slightly believe that athletics scholarships adequately compensate athletes in football and basketball; 39 percent moderately or strongly believe that athletics scholarships constitute fair compensation; and 15 percent do not know. The survey did not ask additional questions that may further explain this perception, such as whether faculty who appear to support additional aid to football and basketball athletes believe additional aid should cover the full cost of attendance, be given only to those athletes with financial need, or be provided as an additional flat stipend.

### *3. Faculty who believe general university funds are used to subsidize intercollegiate athletics on their campus tend to be dissatisfied with this practice.*

Of the 791 faculty members who believe that the use of general funds to subsidize intercollegiate athletics is “Slightly to Very Much” characteristic of their campus, more faculty members (64 percent) than not (24 percent) are generally dissatisfied with the use of those funds for athletics. The level of dissatisfaction dramatically decreases when the perception of the subsidization level decreases. Eighty percent of faculty who believe general fund subsidization of athletics is “Very Much” characteristic of their campus are dissatisfied with this practice, as opposed to 14 percent who are satisfied. A smaller portion (62 percent) of faculty members who believe general fund subsidization is “Moderately” characteristic of their campus are dissatisfied with the subsidization practice, while

25 percent are satisfied. Once the faculty perception reaches the level of subsidization being “Slightly” characteristic of their campus, faculty satisfaction of the practice is nearly split—41 percent are satisfied and 38 percent are dissatisfied.

### *4. Faculty members cite financial issues most frequently among their own personal concerns about intercollegiate athletics.*

When asked what most concerns them about intercollegiate athletics on their respective campus, the largest number of faculty members (342) cite financial issues. In particular, faculty highlight the high costs of athletics and its subsidization with general funds. The next largest groups of faculty concerns about college sports are the treatment of athletes (209) and campus climates that prioritize athletics over academics (193).

*Student athletes provide a HUGE value to universities with very little compensation. I don't think it's fair.*

—Survey Respondent

## Impact of Campus Context

Although it may seem obvious, it is useful to state that the survey results clearly demonstrate that faculty perceptions of their general campus context predict their perception of and satisfaction with their intercollegiate athletics program.

An experimental taxonomy was created to search for variations in the perceptions of faculty who work in universities that differ in academic and athletics success. Institutions from the sample were placed in one of four categories: Higher Athletic/Higher Academic; Higher Athletic/Lower Academic; Lower Athletic/Higher Academic; Lower Athletic/Lower Academic. Institutions were divided among the higher/lower academic categories based on graduation rates in football and men’s basketball and average test scores for all entering students. The higher/lower athletic categories are based on institutions’ appearances in the men’s basketball tournament and football bowl games over the most recent six-year period.

More faculty at institutions in the Higher Athletic categories believe that athletics is not subsidized by

university general funds, perceive that athletics success leads to donations in other areas, and believe that their intercollegiate teams fulfill part of their university's service mission to the state.

Faculty at institutions in the Higher Athletic/Higher Academic category more often perceive that the faculty and president agree on matters related to athletics; faculty governance roles are better defined; and the athletics department runs a clean program. However, they express more concern about the demands on athletes and are most distressed by the professionalization of intercollegiate athletics on their campus.

Faculty at institutions in the Higher Athletic/ Lower Academic group are more concerned about the influence of external groups on intercollegiate athletics decisions and, compared to the other groups, assign the highest priority to intercollegiate athletics for campus governance groups. Another distinguishing characteristic of this group is that they tend to be more concerned about the structural separation of athletics from the

university and a campus culture that places a greater emphasis on athletics than academics.

Comparatively, faculty at campuses in the Lower Athletic/Lower Academic group are most concerned with the escalating costs of athletics and are least satisfied with the subsidization of athletics with university general funds. Although this group shares similar dissatisfaction with governance aspects, it more strongly perceives that athletics administrators use their power and influence to control decisions.

Faculty members at institutions in the Lower Athletic/Higher Academic group share financial concerns with their colleagues in the

other lower athletic performance group; however, they do not share the same level of dissatisfaction with governance. Faculty in this group have the highest satisfaction with the academic performance of football and basketball athletes. In contrast, they have the lowest level of satisfaction with athletes in sports other than football and basketball.

*If athletics are a net revenue source for the University, then I have no issue. I do not know if this is the case. If the education and research missions are financially subsidizing athletics, then that would be a problem.*

—Survey Respondent

## Conclusion and Discussion

Survey findings reveal a steep challenge ahead for those seeking greater faculty involvement in intercollegiate athletics. Although faculty members are dissatisfied with many facets of college sports, their dissatisfaction may not be strong enough to motivate action given the low priority they give intercollegiate athletics when compared to other campus issues for faculty governance to consider. Perhaps the greatest challenge to increasing faculty engagement with athletics is the lack of knowledge faculty appear to have about many key policies, practices and issues. Survey results highlight the need for administrators and faculty in campus leadership positions, and particularly those involved in athletics governance, to consider opportunities and mechanisms to better inform faculty members.

The experimental taxonomy also suggests that the level of team academic and athletics success may mediate faculty perceptions, satisfaction and concerns in significant ways. It appears useful for faculty and administrators to consider the impact these institutional characteristics have as dialogue continues about the faculty's role in maintaining healthy relationships between academics and athletics on campus.

*The complete research report and data tables are accessible on [www.knightcommission.org](http://www.knightcommission.org).*