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Academic fraud at Auburn

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Academic fraud at Auburn
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While contemplating the fact that T.O. has claimed he was misquoted in his autobiography, I was bemused by the revelations of what appears to be academic fraud associated with intercollegiate athletics anywhere, but especially when it involves football and Auburn University. I am surprised that anyone would be surprised by such revelations. It was, by the way, an Auburn athlete who first claimed to have been misquoted in his autobiography.

Let me say up front that I am not singling out Auburn for criticism. Any number of institutions are equally undistinguished when it comes to the issues of academic standards and eligibility. Many institutions of the higher learning have been caught in academic scandals over the years. Indeed, it would be rare to find a university playing football or basketball at the elite level that has not been involved in dubious academic practices. It just so happens that in this case, and in other earlier cases, Auburn University has distinguished itself.

When Pat Dye first moved from East Carolina to Auburn as football coach there was a story that circulated in the football folk culture claiming that Pat Dye thought he would never move from East Carolina because he would never be able to find another university with lower academic standards. Then he discovered Auburn.

This past week, the New York Times published an investigative report concerning academic fraud at Auburn. It seems that in 2004 there was a prominent football player honored during a televised game as a scholar athlete. Professor James Gundlach, director of the Sociology Program at Auburn, noticed that this player was identified as a sociology major. Having never had the player in his classes, Gundlach checked with several colleagues in the department, and none of them had ever taught this player.

Gundlach checked the records and this led to the discovery that members of the 2004 football team at Auburn had taken 97 hours of directed readings courses in sociology during their Auburn careers. All were taught by the same professor, Dr. Thomas Peete, Chairman of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Criminology, and Social Work. At one point the hard-working

Chair was carrying a workload of three and one-half faculty members and offered 152 such courses in one semester, and 250 in one year. In the Soviet Union he would have been Stakhanovite professor of the year.

More than a quarter of all of Dr. Peete's students in the Directed Readings classes were athletes. The football players had an average grade-point-average of 3.31 in these classes, while having an average of 2.14 in all their other classes. Just over 80 percent of the football players received A's in Peete's classes. One athlete took seven of Peete's classes, three others took six of these classes, five took five classes, and eight took four, according to Gundlach's survey.

None of this is unusual. All universities have professors who are involved in the care and feeding of athletic grade point averages. The academic advisors to athletes know who these people are and direct their athletes into those majors and those classes that are "athlete friendly." For those athletes looking for a major in eligibility, or for any students looking for a degree rather than an education, the line of least academic resistance is religiously followed.

The Auburn case is of special interest for several reasons. First, it is clear that the practices at Auburn involving one faculty member doing the work of three and one-half faculty members involves more than a little help to a few athletes. Second, this dubious academic practice involved the chair of a department, an academic leader whose standards and practices should be an example to his faculty.

More remarkable is the fact that, when this faculty member was exposed, he was not removed from his position as department chair. The message from Auburn's administration is clear: there are many ways to serve the university and one is to serve the athletic program. In addition, Auburn authorities are not willing to admit that the athletes were directed to these courses by the athletic academic advisors, claiming that Auburn is dedicated to the education of its athletes, a comment worthy of The Daily Show.

In addition, the service to Auburn involves more than athletic eligibility. In the recent calculation of progress toward graduation rates, Auburn was fourth nationally, behind Stanford, Navy, and Boston College and just ahead of Duke. Did anyone find this improbable? We now know how such a ranking was achieved.

It is always refreshing to be able to start the college football season with a solid reminder of the basic corruption of the academic mission by big time athletic programs. Once again Auburn has illustrated this basic truth of elite intercollegiate athletics. They are truly a national leader in the field.

As for the NCAA, previous reactions to academic fraud such as that at Tennessee, assure us that it will do little or nothing. In the Tennessee case, NCAA President Myles Brand told columnist Bob Gilbert that the NCAA was responsible for athletic, but not academic violations or academic standards of its member institutions. These are matters for individual institutions. However the NCAA did add more bowl games and add an extra regular season game to the football menu. This should go a long ways to alleviate the pressures producing these sorts of problems.

That is what is meant by leadership in higher education in America.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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