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Outsourcing Collegiate Sports

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In some places it's called "privatizing." Here in Florida it is called "outsourcing." Over the past few years a number of campus functions have been "outsourced." The most recent example on our campus is the bookstore, which was outsourced to Barnes and Noble, a company that seemed better equipped than the university to run a bookstore. And probably they are.

This idea has swept the country. A number of large bookstore chains have moved onto campuses to improve the quality of university bookstores. Here in Florida "outsourcing" the bookstore was strongly suggested by the Republican political establishment who understands better than most the beauty of private enterprise. It has the added benefit of allowing politicians to claim they reduced the size of the state government.

Similar developments can be seen in such functions as food service and housing, and no doubt there will be more to come as the state continues to look for ways to downsize the payroll, and move more functions into the private sector. Accounting, Human Resources, Physical Plant, all seem like natural candidates.

Clearly "outsourcing" is an idea whose time has come. Today I would like to endorse "outsourcing" for one of the biggest and most popular of enterprises on the campus, intercollegiate athletics. What activity could be more attractive to entrepreneurial types who find ego inflation or a testosterone rush a daily essential? What better activity for those booster-types whose self-image is tied to the college sports scene?

There must be thousands of flush businessmen and women who would like nothing better than to own their own sport's franchise, and a college franchise would be within their financial reach. Maybe they can't afford the Miami Dolphins or the Oakland Raiders, but surely some of them would find the Florida Gators, the Michigan Wolverines, or Slippery Rock within their budget.

For the smaller investor Division II and III teams in the lesser sports could be had for a song: "A franchise for every investor, and for every investor a franchise." Who could possibly resist the idea of ownership of a team at their alma mater?

The rush to ownership of a piece of the athletic action at Enormous State University would resemble an avalanche. Athletic programs short on cash flow would suddenly find the solution to their problems. And indeed some of these operations would even make money, what with television contracts, endorsement potential, and the end of the NCAA.

The advantage to the university is obvious. They could get out of the intercollegiate athletic business immediately and be free of all those nasty ethical and moral questions and dilemmas that face them daily. University Presidents would no longer lay awake at night dreaming up explanations for undergraduate felons on campus, nor would they need to worry about the fact that the quarterback is driving a nicer car than the chief executive officer of the university.

Coaches would no longer need to concern themselves with controlling the athletes off the field, or making sure the players were going to class or at least feigning the role of student. The thickness of the NCAA book of rules and regulations would no longer be an issue. The hypocrisy and humiliation required in the recruitment process would end. Grown men and women would no longer find it necessary to pursue teenagers with false promises in hope that the teenager would come play for them and save their jobs. In point of fact there would be no need to use students to staff the teams. Of course students would still be eligible to play.

On the field teams would still look the same. They would continue to wear the school colors and logos, along with the logos of all those shoe and equipment companies and anyone else with a checkbook. The teams would be owned and operated by individuals and corporate entities willing to pay handsomely for the franchise rights.

There would be no more concern about the corruption of the educational mission of the university. The fictions that have grown up to rationalize intercollegiate athletics would disappear. There would no longer be a need to talk of character building, Frank Merriwell, or the Gipper.

Intercollegiate athletics would now be solely an entertainment, albeit a necessary one. Like the bookstore, the campus food services, and whatever else goes the "outsourcing" route, intercollegiate athletics would be what it always should have been, an adjunct to the educational mission of the university, rather than a corrupter of that mission.

The intercollegiate athletic system would still bring glory to Enormous State University and it would also bring ego satisfaction to moderately rich Americans who want to own their own sports team.

This is the true meaning of public service and a worthy goal for athletic programs at any self-respecting American college or university.

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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