

# Big-Time College Football Depriving Athletes of an Education

By [Sherwood Ross](#)

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The transformation of varsity college football programs into unabashed commercial ventures has come at the academic expense of their players, only about half of whom are graduating. Indeed, pressures on the varsity team performers in today's Big Time college football atmosphere have made a mockery of the "student-athlete" concept. At the University of California, Berkeley, for example, a shockingly low 53 percent of the varsity football squad players graduate. UC's dismal success rate, like that of so many other football powerhouses, is significantly lower than that reported by the National Collegiate Athletic Assn.(NCAA) for varsity players generally in all sports, which ranges from 60 to 70 percent. That's according to Michael Oriard, associate dean at Oregon State University and author of "Bowled Over: Big-Time College Football from the Sixties to the BCS Era"(University of North Carolina Press). Oriard was a second-team All-American at Notre Dame in the Sixties, and afterwards went on to play for the Kansas City Chiefs. The BCS era referred to in the title of his book stands for the Bowl Championship Series that was created in 1998 ostensibly to determine the national champion in Division 1-A college football but which, in fact, has worked to create big paydays for the conferences that provide bowl game competitors.

"I don't think the kind of full college educational experience that I received and that was available to my teammates around the country is available today, because it has become so much more time-consuming, so much more intense," Oriard says. "When I was a student at Notre Dame I not only graduated and got an education but I got the best education that my institution offered me while still playing big-time college football, because it was possible to do both at the same time," he told TV book show host Lawrence Velvel of "Books of Our Time", which appears on Comcast. Velvel is the dean of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover.

In his college playing days, Oriard attended classes until 3 p.m., when he would suit up and practice on the playing field until 5 p.m., take a dinner break and attend a team film meeting. By 7 p.m. or 7:30 p.m. he would be free to devote himself to academic pursuits. That meant going to the library until about midnight and then to bed. Today, by contrast, he says, it's typical for football team players to have to lift weights early in the morning, squeeze in their class work by 1 p.m., then view films and practice, and then probably commit to more film viewing after practice. "The number of hours that are required has increased by at least a couple every day, if not more than that, for some players," Oriard says.

Added to this burden is "the enormously greater pressure" of performing on television. "Everything they do is on Sports Center, on the highlights, and all this sort of thing," Oriard

says. Moreover, the money that is being generated by the programs is much greater today—as is the pressure on the coaches and their assistants—so that the college football environment is both more intense and more time-consuming, he contends. In fact, “I think college football is really fundamentally at odds with the desire to create a real educational experience for the young men participating and, at the same time, to compete at the highest level.” He notes that some colleges are reaping close to \$90 million annually from football and a coach can earn \$4 or \$5 million per year, far more than the university president.

Oriard says the evolution of intercollegiate football into a costly and potentially lucrative activity began in the 1890s, when only about two percent of Americans even attended college. When the Thanksgiving Day games between Ivy League schools Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, began drawing as many as 40,000 to 50,000 fans to New York, it opened the eyes of university officials to the fact these contests could be good promotion and inspire donations from the local community and attract students. By the 1920s, the commercial football spectacle was filling ever larger stadiums and the resultant revenues were funding the Ivy League schools and enhancing their appeal. The three above-cited institutions would have achieved greatness even if they had not played football back then, Oriard says, but other schools such Notre Dame, a small Catholic college in Indiana that became a national brand name before that term existed, soared to sports fame on the pass-catching prowess of end Knute Rockne (later the most successful Notre Dame football coach in history) and a backfield sports writer Grantland Rice in 1924 dubbed the “Four Horsemen.” As Rice put it:

“Outlined against a blue-gray October sky the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as famine, pestilence, destruction and death. These are only aliases. Their real names are: Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden. They formed the crest of the South Bend cyclone before which another fighting Army team was swept over the precipice at the Polo Grounds this afternoon as 55,000 spectators peered down upon the bewildering panorama spread out upon the green plain below.”

“Because of the times, its lowly academic beginnings, and because it was Catholic and immigrant and therefore despised by lots of mainstream WASP Americans,” Notre Dame sought to overcome the prejudices against it through football mastery, Oriard said. It started playing a national schedule, traveling to USC in Los Angeles, SMU in Dallas, and Georgia Tech in Atlanta because such name schools would not travel to South Bend, Indiana. “And they tried to play on the East Coast whenever possible because that’s where the sports writers were,” Oriard says. And so Notre Dame became a leading national university through the football team. Other denominational colleges that also built football powerhouses on the Notre Dame model included Northwestern, Vanderbilt, Duke, Rice, and SMU. At SMU, officials courted the business community through the football program—building a stadium in 1925 but not erecting a library until 1939.

Oriard says that football “was fundamental” to the growth of American higher education in the 1920s, which raises the question of whether it continues to be essential to American higher education today. Oriard answers his own question by saying that, if you could imagine Berkeley, UCLA, Michigan, Virginia and the University of North Carolina without football, “the immediate impact would be minimal. They would still get top students applying.” The research seems to suggest, he continued, that “in general, there’s not a correlation between athletic success and fundraising and admissions, particularly for programs that are already established. And for (schools) such as Gonzaga University, that

can have a big bump immediately following the success (in basketball), it's a one-time bump. Things don't keep bumping ever after."

Some universities have discovered that big-time football is too expensive for them and have dropped out of the competition. Others, such as the University of Buffalo and the University of South Florida, elected to rise from their lower status to big time at a time when to compete against the Michigans, Ohio States, Alabamas, and Nebraskas—which enjoy so much revenue from gate receipts and TV—"seems enormously difficult," Oriard says. Among the top 117 football teams in Football Bowl Subdivision 1A and excluding the military academies, the top quarter of these teams average \$46 million a year in football revenues. "Programs that have the 100,000-seat stadiums—Michigan, Ohio State, Penn State, and Tennessee—have a tremendous advantage here," Oriard states. "And it's not just the number of people you can put into a stadium, it's the dollars per seat you can charge. Because they have waiting lists there you can sell premium seating, and you can have luxury suites and that sort of thing." In 2008, the University of Texas led all other schools in income with \$87 million from football, what Oriard termed an "astonishing number." The NCAA has calculated that only between 19 and 24 in its 120-team subdivision will consistently make any money. Teams require big bucks as the average coach in the Football Bowl subdivision earns over \$1 million and in the BCS bowls \$2 million has become the entry level salary for a coach, Oriard says. The professionalism of college coaching is attested to by the fact some college coaches move back and forth between collegiate posts and NFL gigs and things have escalated to where all college coaches today have agents, just like NFL stars. "And so they get these contracts that this coach will make the highest salary in the conference, or no less than the second highest salary, so there's this ratcheting upwards where we're now over \$5 million in a couple of cases," Oriard says.

After 1973, the NCAA divided football into three divisions in recognition of the fact that some schools were competing at a higher level than others. This led to a more focused group of institutions committed to big-time football with the ability to admit virtually anybody they wanted from high school ranks and, because of the newly adopted one-year scholarship that replaced the four-year variety, gave coaches total power over their athletes. "And so all of these young African-American kids from woefully underfunded, formerly segregated schools were suddenly eligible to play college sports, whether or not their schools had adequately prepared them for the college educational experience," Oriard said, adding, "And they had one-year scholarships only and their continuing financial aid was dependent on how well they pleased their football coach."

The real question is, of course, whether this one-year athletic scholarship is in fact an employment contract under the law. Oriard notes the NCAA "was highly conscious of the dangers of that in first calling it a scholarship." He said that then NCAA Executive Director Walter Byers who ran the organization from 1951-1988 instructed conferences to word their letters of intent and grant and aid contracts "in such a way that it avoided the implications of being an employment contract." If they were employment contracts, injured players could file for workman's compensation, as some did. Indeed, the Justice Department has now taken up the issue of whether college "scholarships" are, in fact, work contracts. TV host Velvel, a former Justice Department anti-trust division lawyer, predicted the NCAA will find out "that the fact that it's not a formal contract is of no consequence in antitrust law. It's of great consequence in labor law, but the antitrust statutes bar any 'combination, contract, or conspiracy in restraint of trade.' It's a combination and a conspiracy. So the fact it's not a contract is going to be completely irrelevant to whatever the Department of Justice does."

As the flood of academically unprepared athletes swamped college football rosters in the Seventies, newspapers everywhere reported ensuing academic scandals of “students getting credit for classes they weren’t taking and students found unable to read and so on,” Oriard states. By the early ‘80s, universities were attempting “to cram the genie back into the bottle but it was too late...There’s been a whole series of attempts at academic reform to try to get the academic side back in balance with the athletic side, and how successful all of those efforts have been is a matter of enormous dispute and controversy.” Berkeley’s high athletic drop-out rate “shocked” Oriard, as it was “routinely the best (academically) rated public university in the country.” Berkeley’s conflict was “you’ve got to bring in athletes who are good enough to play at the highest level but they’ve got to be able to compete academically with the very best students, not just in California, but in the country and the world. So how are you going to make this happen?”

The evident favoritism shown to football players has also raised the Title IX issue, a clause in the Patsy T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act of 1972 that states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance...” Oriard believes the current arrangement is inherently contradictory as it clashes with the principle of equity for female students. “Young women have the same right as young men to participate in college athletics,” he says, “but you have this one sport which is also a commercial entertainment that can generate revenue. And if you have equity in terms of the number of athletes, you have this 100-some people on the football team that you’ve got to match over here, so the complaint from this side is, we’ve got to reduce the number of (football)scholarships over here, and the rejoinder is, ‘You do that, you’re going to undermine the revenue-generating possibilities.’ And so you have these two things that are at odds with each other, which is another manifestation of the fundamental contradiction at the heart of college athletics,” Oriard says.

The football authority goes on to say college athletes today are required to play in “an enormous proliferation in the number of games,” one that “devalues every individual game but creates a much larger pool of money, most of which goes to the major conferences.” A glance at the Ohio State varsity football schedule for 1960 and 1962 shows the team played nine regular season games each year. In 2009, however, Ohio State played 12 games, a one-third increase, and the team is set to play 12 games in 2010. The demand for longer schedules, Oriard says, came in part from the creation of Entertainment and Sports Programming Network(ESPN) in 1979, a round-the-clock cable purveyor of sporting events which in time became a competitor of major broadcast networks ABC, CBS, and NBC. The new outlet provided “a lot more available funding for these games,” Oriard said. “When I played,” he added, football was the easiest sport to play as a student, because you miss classes only Fridays before away games, which meant five Fridays a year. That was the most. But now football becomes like basketball or baseball, where you can miss lots of classes during the week in order to get on television...so again there’s lots of implications of this.” Oriard has concluded whether college football players “are getting a very good education has become questionable.”

*Interviewer Lawrence Velvel, founder of the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, is dean of a law school purposefully dedicated to providing a quality, rigorous legal education to students from minority, immigrant, and low-income backgrounds who would not otherwise be able to obtain a legal education. The law school also through its television*

*broadcasts and conferences provides a major forum for discussion of vital issues.*

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