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Is It Education or Business?...

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All organizations must have direction and focus. The overall mission and the goals of the organization must be articulated in a way that creates a philosophical and practical foundation from which to work. Athletics departments are complex organizations even in the smallest of institutions.

It is often difficult to create concrete mission and goal statements for athletics programs because they are dynamic organizations that can be easily influenced by many variables such as economics, personnel inside and outside the department, teams' or athletes' successes and failures, alumni/ae interests, and the practices of the institutions they compete against. In addition, the mission of any athletics program is rarely focused on one outcome. Program objectives often reflect and accommodate two distinctly different mandates: 1) providing students with an educational sports experience that is a worthwhile and appropriate complement to the university's central mission of education and personal development, and 2) demonstrating achievement of ancillary and often unrelated objectives such as increasing student enrollment, enhancing institutional exposure, maximizing alumni/ae involvement, and in some cases, raising a significant amount of money.

Some suggest that these two mandates are incompatible. The first mandate, which is educational in nature, focuses on personal growth of student-athletes; while the second is a business perspective that may lead to an exaggerated emphasis on winning and the exploitation of student-athletes. However, athletics is not alone. This dissonance between education and business can be found in other academic and administrative departments as well. For example, most educators would agree that the primary objective of each faculty member should be teaching excellence. Yet, the faculty member that produces important research, acquires significant grant dollars, and is nationally recognized may not be held to the same standards of teaching proficiency. Similarly, the objective of the university's development officer may be to raise as much money as possible. But what happens when donors want decision-making authority about the educational curriculum that may compromise institutional integrity? These issues in campus offices other than athletics seem to be more manageable. They are usually isolated problems that don't affect the overall mission or function of a department. They are handled on a case-by-case basis and may be less visible to the outside world.

Balancing educational objectives and business objectives can be a more difficult and pervasive problem for athletics departments because it is woven into the fabric of everyday work. For example, coaches may be under significant pressure to meet recruiting quotas in order for the institution to fill the class and maximize tuition revenue. The admissions department may aid in the process by lowering academic standards. Once those student-athletes have matriculated the pressure changes. Then coaches are expected, perhaps unfairly, to meet the educational objectives of developing those academically under-qualified athletes into model students who graduate.

The problem is not whether educational and business objectives can co-exist within a university athletics program. The real dilemma is how to strike a balance that university administrators feel comfortable with, can articulate, and will support. Defining the educational objectives and the business objectives that apply to the athletics program is the first step toward formulating a department mission that is compatible with that of the institution.

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