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Athletes deserve to receive an education on their terms — not those of the NCAA

When Frank Porter Graham, then the UNC system president, announced in 1935 his desire to return college sports to their amateur roots, alumni and boosters complained the reforms he proposed would cripple North Carolina’s sports teams.

The editors of this newspaper responded shortly afterward by posing the following question: “Do you want to recognize athletics as the big business that it is?”

Three quarters of a century later, we’re still waiting for a response. And so, in the shadow of the Wainstein report, perhaps the most damning proof to date that high-profile athletic programs and academic excellence continue to be at odds, it is time to commit to an answer:

Yes. Despite The Daily Tar Heel’s past resistance to big-time college athletics, we want to recognize that this University is in the business of fielding high-budget, high-revenue sports teams for institutional gain.

We see little wrong with this arrangement, per se, other than that it has yet to be formally acknowledged by the NCAA and its member institutions.

But it is precisely that disingenuous attitude toward the status quo that fails student-athletes. It is the unwillingness to fully face the obstacles they encounter in their attempts to complete a degree while essentially performing a full-time job and managing their celebrity. And it is the pretense that this is a reasonable demand

upon those whose compensation is so compromised that provides incentive for fraud here and elsewhere.

The damaged link between academic achievement and athletic eligibility ought to be formally broken. Athletes recruited to this school as such should continue to be given the opportunity to pursue a degree, but they should not be compelled to do so.

This would not preclude students from seeking to excel academically on their own terms, but it would eliminate the need to cover up any existing deficiencies in primary and secondary education, which are only magnified in the face of demanding practice and travel schedules.

The student-athletes at this school are remarkable people. A significant majority are perfectly capable and willing to complete a quality education while performing at the highest levels of their sports. Proposing that they not be required to do so does not undermine or fail to acknowledge these strengths. Instead, it puts more power in the hands of student-athletes to determine the terms upon which they are affiliated with this University and live their lives.

Providing student-athletes with a choice of whether to enroll as full-time students would create more visible distinctions between athletes and the student body, something the collegiate model abhors. But these distinctions already exist: For example, student reporters must go through the athletic department — whose employees act as players’ gatekeepers — to speak with athletes who

are otherwise their friends. Some athletes are barred from engaging in other extracurriculars or find their social media accounts subject to censorship. These sharp contrasts in the way athletes and members of the general student body are treated must be formally acknowledged and dealt with in an equitable manner.

We must either return to a model of true amateurism or work to accommodate the reality that many student-athletes are, for all intents and purposes, employees given a scholarship in return for a service rendered. Attempts to have it both ways have been primarily responsible for the fraud outlined in the Wainstein report.

A return to amateurism now seems impossible. It would involve eliminating athletic scholarships and losing millions of dollars in revenue that have funded the ascents of so many schools to greatness. Professional-level athletics at the University are immensely popular, and understandably so.

Athletics has given its community a beloved common culture. It’s hard to imagine UNC without heroes like Dean Smith or stories like that of Michael Jordan’s go-ahead shot to win the 1982 championship. These are the images that have brought international attention to this school and enhanced its prestige.

Similarly, the NCAA and its model of amateur athletics seem to represent an objective good for many students in allowing them to pursue a degree while doing what they love. But the abundant good for

which this system is responsible cannot be allowed to justify an institutional structure that allows, if not encourages, action in direct opposition to the best interests of some student-athletes.

Unintended consequences of a different nature will arise from any overhaul of the collegiate model. Issues of just compensation and lost opportunities for non-revenue athletes should not be overlooked.

But today’s collegiate model is not sacrosanct. Its flaws deserve to be considered on balance with those of proposed alternatives. We believe we have more to gain from an honest assessment of the relationship between athlete and university than we have already lost by delaying this conversation for decades.

The University is now considering steps toward de-emphasizing the requirement that student-athletes be full-time students to remain eligible, including the possibility of a mandatory academic red-shirt. Everything is on the table, though it must be acknowledged that whatever action is taken toward this end will have to occur, in fits and starts, within a cumbersome NCAA framework.

Generations of Tar Heels born and bred in the Carolina Way might struggle to believe that UNC now possesses the moral standing to lead a fight to reform collegiate athletics. Yet in these first few weeks of the post-Wainstein era, the national microphone and the public ear are trained upon us. Now is the time to redeem what we have lost. Now is the time to speak up.

EDITOR’S NOTE	TALK BACK
Editor-in-Chief Jenny Surane offers an explanation for today’s front page editorial. See dailytarheel.com for her column.	We’d love to discuss our editorial with you. Meet us at Linda’s Bar and Grill at 2 p.m. Friday and tell us what you think of our proposal.

“That which is crooked cannot be made straight.”

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