2005

Presidents and the NCAA - 20th Anniversary, delivered in 2005

Arend D. Lubbers
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/presidential_speeches
Part of the Archival Science Commons, Education Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/presidential_speeches/246

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presidential Speeches by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Twenty years ago motivated by a concern for the legitimacy of collegiate athletics, the Presidents of the colleges and universities of the National Collegiate Athletic Association established a President’s Council. At the time the council stood apart from the regular governance structure of the NCAA. It sent its recommendations to the governance bodies and revised legislative action taken by them.

The growing cost and for some the growing revenue contributed to the escalating importance of athletics for all colleges and universities. The effect of television media on collegiate athletics by the 1980’s created a national interest and audience that few had foreseen, and with it brought large sums of money into play. The issues stirred by this change required the Presidents involvement. To fail to engage would be a surrender of responsibility. The role of athletics at each college and university became a more important element in the definition of the institutions a President would ignore athletics to his or her peril.

The formation of the Presidents Council provided a structure where President’s could deal with the issues and excesses that confronted colleges and universities in the changed environment of collegiate athletics. As they worked on policies and practices for the NCAA it was apparent that they had to be in charge in the nation as they were expected to be on their own campuses. In 1997 the change from President’s Council to President’s Commission confirmed the President’s executive authority in the NCAA governance structure, a ratification of the inevitable, and a position held by a minority of Presidents back in 1984.

From the time the Presidents became formally involved in the NCAA structure they addressed the most serious athletic issues found by the member institutions. They set sensible academic standards for athletes. They made attempts to control spending. They insisted that women and men be treated equally. They listened to minorities seeking opportunities to advance in athletic professions. They promoted the welfare of the student athletes and tried to protect them from exploitations. They sought an “even playing field” as they tried to make the rules of competitions fair and reasonable.

Establishing standards of academic performance required for participation in collegiate athletics was an early challenge for the Presidents and their colleagues in NCAA governance. High school grades and core courses, test scores and racial concerns were on the agenda as the Presidents received reports, debated and finally accepted a policy. College sports were not open to all who brought with them a high school diploma. The diploma had to be accompanied by a proven record of competency. The policy has been improved over the years. The principle remains the same.

The costs of athletics are not immune from the budget makers review. The presidents of each NCAA Division have insisted on caps or reductions in student aid for athletes, and by placing limits on schedules, recruitment and practice found ways to limit costs. The cost cutting search goes on with varying degrees of intensity and success. At the same time some aspiring universities move into a Division I category seeking recognition by inevitably spending more.
Decisions on cost containment and Divisional definition have not yet reached a satisfactory conclusion.

The depth of feeling about gender and racial issues results naturally from higher expectations and the belief that past treatment was unfair. The Presidents are always ready to deal seriously with gender and racial issues. All of them during my NCAA experience wanted fairness, equality and opportunity. They acted vigorously through NCAA legislations and the initiation of programs to advance those virtues for women and minorities.

The low graduation rate among athletes is evidence of student exploitations. Trying to win takes precedence over trying to graduate in some athletic departments. Certainly it does amongst many fans. The first priority for a college student is the successful completion of a course of study, a value different to sustain when collegiate athletic programs become the form teams for professional athletics. Even in too many Division II and III institutions where professional scouts look less frequently, the graduation rates are too low. Under mandate from the federal government the Presidents want an opening to improve graduation rates and provide a win for academic integrity. Rules are in place to encourage universities in Division I to increase the number of athlete graduates. These rules are a modest attack on a culture with deep roots.

The natural desire to win and the rewards for coaches and institutions where victories substantially outnumber the losses make winning a high priority. The nation's enthusiasm for athletic contests is likely to sustain that priority indefinitely. The President's Commissions, then, has the obligation along with all of their NCAA colleagues to see that the pursuit of victories is conducted fairly, in the best interests of athletes, and without threat to sound academic practice. The Division I certification requirement helps toward this end. The self study reports in other divisions are useful. Closer collaboration between the NCAA and regional accrediting associations could advance the cause.

Since involving themselves in NCAA policy making twenty years ago the Presidents have addressed the right issues. They have demonstrated the will to take on any challenge that challenges the health of collegiate athletics but fairness and integrity in athletics are not stationary. Protections of what has been gained and overcoming continuing afflictions depends on the will, insight and leadership skill of those who presently and, those who will fill the Presidencies of our NCAA colleges and universities.