

## Case 65

# Balancing the Power in College Sports: The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics

*John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 1989*

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*Background.* As the 1980s came to a close, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was facing a crisis. More than a decade of dramatic, highly visible scandals in intercollegiate athletics had shaken the public trust in college sports. Widespread recruiting violations, payments to players, student gambling, drug use and point-shaving incidents revealed a dark side of the college athletics world. An investigation following the drug overdose death of basketball superstar Len Bias at the University of Maryland in 1986 revealed substandard academic achievement among student athletes.<sup>966</sup> In 1987, repeated revelations of payments to Southern Methodist University football players, a scheme in which the governor of Texas was implicated, led the NCAA to impose the “death penalty” on the program, its harshest sanction ever.<sup>967</sup> The NCAA later dealt severe penalties to both the University of Florida’s football program and the University of Nevada at Las Vegas’s basketball program for numerous blatant violations of NCAA rules.<sup>968</sup>

A major element of the controversy stemmed from the tension between university athletics programs and the universities of which they are a part. Presidents of universities gathered to form a Presidents’ Commission in 1983, in large part to address the difficulty they had in controlling their athletics departments.<sup>969</sup> A few presidents who attempted meaningful oversight and control over their athletic programs, however, were rebuffed or even pressured to resign by their governing boards and alumni.<sup>970</sup>

Public outcry over scandals in college sports rose to such a high level that Congress took notice. Over the history of college sports, the federal government had intervened only on rare occasions when the intercollegiate governance system proved incapable of addressing major issues of public concern.<sup>971</sup> While the NCAA struggled to gain control over what seemed to be a downward spiral of public trust in the integrity of college athletics, critics of the NCAA suggested that a body, whose members were the very college athletics programs which were guilty of rules violations, was inherently incapable of reform.<sup>972</sup> Because of the rapid downward spiral of public trust in the integrity of college athletics, Congress appeared ready to intervene.<sup>973</sup>

*Strategy.* The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, created in 1950 by the brothers who founded Knight Newspapers, had a heritage rooted in education and educational values. The Foundation’s inspiration for funding educational programs came from the founders’ father, who provided financial assistance to college students unable to pay their education bills.<sup>974</sup> In the mid-1980s, the Foundation’s assets increased by a factor of twenty, making it the twenty-first largest foundation in the United States. Then, in early 1988, Creed Black, a Knight-Ridder executive and former publisher of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, became the Foundation’s president.

Two years earlier, a journalist at Black’s former paper, the *Herald-Leader*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of a basketball scandal at the University of Kentucky.<sup>975</sup> A year into his presidency, Black led the Knight Foundation to tackle problems plaguing college sports across the country. In March 1989, the Foundation commissioned a public survey which assessed public sentiment on the state of intercollegiate sports; about four-out-of-five respondents indicated that intercollegiate athletics were “out of control.”<sup>976</sup> Six months later, the Knight Foundation created the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, a panel of distinguished community leaders from the academic, business, and sports communities, to study and propose reforms for college sports.<sup>977</sup>

The Knight Foundation initially granted \$2 million to the Commission, and the Commission was

expected to study reform proposals for approximately two years.<sup>976</sup> The Commission's founding co-chairmen, former presidents Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh of Notre Dame and William C. Friday of the University of North Carolina system, were highly respected higher education leaders whose universities had storied athletics programs.<sup>979</sup> After months of anticipation, the Commission released its first report, *Keeping Faith with the Student-Athlete*, in March 1991.<sup>980</sup> Reported to be the first comprehensive study of the state of college athletics since the Carnegie Foundation released a similar study in 1929, *Keeping Faith* condemned a system in which half of Division I-A schools had been sanctioned by the NCAA in the 1980s and set forth a reform agenda.<sup>981</sup> Central to the report's recommendations was the conclusion that college presidents must exert greater authority over their universities' athletic programs.<sup>982</sup>

After the release of the report, the Commission, and the Commission's co-chairmen in particular, embarked on an extensive lobbying effort with the NCAA members to see that its proposals were adopted. The very existence of the Knight Commission seems to have heartened the Presidents Commission—many university presidents served on both bodies—to embark on an ambitious reform agenda.<sup>983</sup> Indeed, in March 1993, the Knight Commission was dissolved upon adoption of many of its major reforms.<sup>984</sup> Nineteen months later, however, proposals for minimum academic standards for freshman student athletes to compete in inter-collegiate athletics led the Commission to reconvene, with the Knight Foundation's support.<sup>985</sup> Again disbanding in 1996 and reconvening in 2000, the Knight Commission has since served as combination blue-ribbon panel and watchdog organization, weighing in against proposals that empower college athletics programs at the expense of the higher education system and in support of proposals that enhance academic standards and graduation rates for student athletes.<sup>986</sup> Most recently, in January 2006, the Knight Commission held a "Summit on the Collegiate Athletic Experience," an event that brought Commission members face-to-face with top high school and college prospects and professional athletes to hear firsthand the issues facing student athletes.<sup>987</sup> To enhance visibility of the Summit, the Knight Commission has made podcasts of the sessions available to the public on its website.<sup>988</sup>

*Impact.* While the public image of college sports still suffers from occasional revelations of rule-breaking, intercollegiate athletics has progressed far from its low in the 1980s. The Knight Commission has marshaled that progress at each stage, working to prevent regression in policy for the sake of academics and the student athletes. In 1996, the entire governance structure of the NCAA was changed to give college presidents greater authority; a *New York Times* editorial credited the Knight Commission's work for the presidents' reform victory, stating that the reform provisions were "lifted chapter and verse," from the Commission's proposals.<sup>989</sup> The Commission has certainly not prevailed in every battle; most recently, the football schedule was lengthened to a twelve-game season over its fervent protests.<sup>990</sup> Still, the Commission's efforts have been widely credited with counterbalancing the trend toward increasing commercialization in intercollegiate athletics and with representing educational values and the well-being of student-athletes in debates over the future of college sports.

## Notes

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