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Athletics and academics: incompatible?

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Quad 136

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Athletics and Academics: Incompatible?



Recently I have been reading some essays on education by Robert Maynard Hutchins (the collection was a thoughtful gift from an alum). Though they were published during the Great Depression, they contain some timeless insights on the value of education and the role of the university in society. Hutchins was president at the University of Chicago during a period in which it was becoming one of the preeminent universities in the country. One of Hutchins' innovations was the famous Chicago Core Curriculum. “**This famed Core curriculum**, a model for American general education, is the University of Chicago student’s introduction to the tools of inquiry used in every discipline—science, mathematics, humanities, and social sciences. The goal is not just to transfer knowledge, but to raise fundamental questions and become familiar with the powerful ideas that shape our society.”

As I explored Hutchins' biography a bit more, I discovered he was also famous for his views on athletics at the University of Chicago. As the University's website tells it,

The one thing which drew more attention than any other, of course, was his elimination of varsity football. Hutchins heaped scorn upon schools which received more press coverage for their sports teams than for their educational programs, and a run of disastrous seasons gave him the trustee support he needed to drop football in 1939. The decision was hailed by many, but few other schools followed Chicago's lead.



This move was particularly striking as the **University of Chicago was**, at the time, a member of the Big Ten, had won a national championship in 1905, had a Heisman trophy winner in Jay Berwanger in 1935, were known as “the Monsters of the Midway” and had been the home of Amos Alonzo Stagg for 40 years.

This storied history left Hutchins unmoved. “By getting rid of football, by presenting the spectacle of a university that can be great without football, the University of Chicago may perform a signal service to higher education throughout the land,” **Hutchins wrote**, calling the sport “a major handicap to education in the United States.”

In *The Saturday Evening Post* **Hutchins had written**, maybe somewhat intemperately: “In many colleges, it is possible for a boy

to win 12 letters without learning how to write one,” the university’s president, had written acidly of sports in *The Saturday Evening Post*. He particularly disparaged football, deriding as myth the idea that the game produced men of good character or instilled a sense of fair play. Indeed, for a college to be a success on the field, he said, it must be something of a scoundrel beyond it.

Hutchins is something of a hero and inspiration to those who continue to worry about the impact of big-time college sports on the academic mission of the university. There is even **an award named after him** that “is given annually to faculty or staff members who take a courageous stand to defend academic integrity at their institutions.”

I was thinking of Hutchins last week at our mini-commencement for seniors on the Saint John’s University baseball team. On our Commencement Day, the team was competing in the post-season MIAC playoffs to earn a spot in the NCAA tournament (which they secured by sweeping the University of St. Thomas), but the timing forced them to miss Commencement with their classmates. As we have done for athletes with conflicts in the past, we organized a dinner and commencement ceremony for the baseball seniors, their parents and folks from our athletic department.

The nice thing about these special commencements is that you actually get to meet the graduates and their parents and have more in-depth conversations, things that are much more of a challenge with 425 graduates and families in the Abbey Church. As I interacted with the students and their parents that evening I discovered, not really to my surprise, the following:

1. All the students were graduating in four years.
2. All of the students I talked to had jobs that they were starting in the next couple months.
3. One student was still deciding between graduate school and a job offer.
4. One student had turned down a Division II baseball scholarship to play at Saint John’s because the balance between athletics and academics seemed better—a decision that four years in Collegeville had confirmed.
5. The percentage of baseball players graduating with honors was over 20%, compared to the university’s 15% overall.

As impressive as these young men were, they are typical among our athletes. I could tell similar stories about every one of our teams, including football, President Hutchins’ views notwithstanding. What the evening simply reinforced was that there is no inherent conflict between a passion for athletics and a seriousness about academics and education. Hundreds of students on our campus have both, as do many thousands around the country.

I suspect that the numbers are greater in the NCAA’s Division III, which is the division that the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) competes in, because there are no scholarships, minimal commercial support, and the coaches, fans, parents and athletes are all committed to maintaining the proper balance between athletics and academics. This is certainly not to say that balance cannot be found in Division II or Division I, but the incentives that come with scholarships and serious outside money make it more difficult.

For all of Hutchins’ wisdom about higher education, his views on the role of athletics are certainly not borne out by the experience of most student-athletes at Saint John’s or DIII more generally.

Football returned to the University of Chicago as a **varsity sport in 1969**. The Maroons now play in the University Athletic Conference rather than the Big Ten, competing in Division III, like most other fine liberal arts schools.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).