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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "As universities cash in on sports mania, is something being lost?" (2009). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 4.
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As universities cash in on sports mania, is something being lost?

*By Diether Haenicke
August 26, 2009*

A few years ago a colleague and I met, at a hotel check-out desk in Dallas, the presidents of Central and Eastern Michigan universities and decided to share the cost of transportation to the airport. The four of us piled into a hot and narrow taxi.

As we were unloading our luggage at the curbside check-in, a chauffeur-driven limousine pulled up and out stepped the athletic director of a major Michigan university who had attended the same NCAA conference. We met him later sipping a beverage in his first-class seat as three university presidents passed him on their way into steerage. It was a symbolic moment: academics meets athletics.

We had a good laugh about it at the time, but we also thought that a few things in some big athletics programs were perhaps out of kilter.

When I worked as chief academic officer in a Big 10 school, we divided universities into those where most students knew the name of the president, usually a distinguished professor, and those universities where most students knew the name of the football coach but not that of their president or academic dean.

Not many big schools made it into the first category. I believe this situation was typical for the entire Big 10 and very likely still prevails today in most top-ranked college athletics programs.

What has happened in our universities? Is the tail wagging the dog? There is no doubt: While most of our national public universities are academic jewels and the envy of the world, most Americans know these schools for their athletic prowess, their athletic teams' presence on TV and their appearances in the mushrooming bowl games.

I recently mused with Chris Reynolds about these questions. Now an assistant athletic director at Western Michigan University, he knows the big time having played basketball at Indiana for one of the game's most legendary coaches. (I probably don't have to name that coach, but does anyone know who is president of Indiana University?) Mr. Reynolds thinks that the year 1993 was one of the big turning points in college sports when the NCAA negotiated a \$1 billion contract with CBS, which gave the network exclusive rights to the basketball tournaments for several years.

At that time the really big money entered college sports and administrators realized how much money could be made with college athletics. Every Division I conference in the land began to lust after TV contracts, and the institutional coffers filled up. Many universities charge ticket prices that are almost out of reach for normal wage earners. Yet there are always more than enough fans who want to see the big games.

And price seems to be no object. Ask anyone who ever scalped tickets for, let's say, a U of M -- Notre Dame football game. College athletics has become big business. Americans just love sports, and their appetite for it seems insatiable. And the universities are cashing in on that sports mania. The enormous revenues from TV and from contracts with manufacturers of sports equipment combined with the income from school logos, concessions and parking bring unprecedented wealth.

An anecdote from Ohio State football history illuminates probably the last time when academics attempted to control the growing influence of sports in their university. In 1961, undefeated in the Big 10 and having trounced Michigan 50-20, OSU was scheduled to go to the Rose Bowl. However, the Faculty Council, fearing that the academic reputation of the school was being overshadowed by the enormous popularity of coach Woody Hayes' football program, voted not to send his team to the Rose Bowl. Open warfare ensued on campus and all over the state of Ohio. But the faculty prevailed, and the Big Ten champion did not go to Pasadena that year.

Today it is inconceivable that such a vote would ever be taken or, if taken, that it would stand. Big money and sports mania rule athletics, and Don Quixote died long ago.

This column was first published Sept. 8, 1999 in the Kalamazoo Gazette mlive.com/kalamazoo