

# The spirit of the game

College athletics scandals appear regularly in the press. Typically, these controversies involve big-time athletics programs that serve as the recruiting grounds for professional sports teams. The lure of network television attention, revenue from paraphernalia and contracts for star players exert enormous pressure on athletes and programs and often distort the true purpose of athletics in higher education.

NCAA Division III athletics, by contrast, appear pure. Scholarships aren't offered for athletic competition; the attention paid to athletics is typically limited to the campus community, and graduate school is far more likely to await graduates than an opportunity to play professional sports. The reality, however, is more complicated, with commitment to placing academics first varying from school to school and from conference to conference. In the just-published book, *Reclaiming the Game*, former Princeton University President William G. Bowen and former All-American collegiate athlete Sara Levin say the educational missions of academically selective schools are threatened by the pressure to compete. At some institutions, athletes enjoy a significant admissions advantage if their names appear on coaches' recruitment lists. Once admitted, athletes often underperform in the classroom and more regularly engage in patterns of social behavior that



set them apart from their fellow students.

Such problems are by no means the norm. Wheaton, for example, fields extremely successful athletics programs, yet does so while emphasizing sports as part of a well-rounded liberal arts education. I believe the key is campus culture: emphasizing coaches' primary role as educators, operating study programs and mentoring that make academics a daily presence in the athletic center, involving faculty in athletics to model the proper place of sports in a life of learning.

Wheaton's approach integrates athletics into the fabric of academic life, the same philosophy behind the learning communities model we follow in the residence halls. Of course, the college has some distinct advantages, including a long tradition of combining athletics with academics. Wheaton's decision to build a gymnasium in 1844 made it the first educational institution in the nation to build such a freestanding sports facility. Field hockey celebrated a century of competition last fall. To that legacy, Wheaton's executive

director of athletics, Chad Yowell, has brought an invaluable perspective as a former dean of students who appreciates the larger purpose of athletics. In fact, Chad has been active in formulating a reform package that the NCAA Division III will vote on in January.

The reforms proposed by the NCAA—targeting changes in financial aid, membership, eligibility and recruiting, playing and practice seasons—offer a good start in reversing the slide down the slippery slope and reaffirming that athletics serve educational goals by reinforcing the values of teamwork, discipline, ethical competition and respect for others. I am heartened by the way in which college presidents are preparing to take action. The Annapolis Group, an association of the nation's top liberal arts colleges in which I am active, has devoted considerable time and attention to the issue. And Wheaton's conference, the New England Women's and Men's Athletic Conference (NEWMAC), plans to take a strong position on the topic this winter.

Of course, the effort to keep athletics in its place as part of a

high-quality educational experience doesn't mean lessening the desire to compete successfully and win often. While Wheaton puts academics first, the college finishes first on the field fairly regularly, too, and this success has been important in improving admissions. Since the NEWMAC's inception five years ago, Wheaton's women's and men's teams have captured 40 conference championships and tournament titles, played in more than 30 NCAA post-season tournaments and won eight national championships. Best of all, our program has been rated among the top 25 in the nation for the last few years in the prestigious Directors' Cup rankings compiled by the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA).

I take great pride in those on-the-field wins as well as the academic accomplishments of our scholar-athletes. The discipline that is needed for success in athletic competition helps these students excel in class as well. In fact, the grade point average for most of our athletic teams is equal to or higher than that of the student body as a whole. Scholar-athletes also are more likely to complete their Wheaton degree than the overall student population.

Athletics and academics can be a winning combination, as Wheaton has demonstrated, when there is a strong commitment to enrolling scholar-athletes, not athletes. ■

