

**COMMENTARY**

# Black athletes need faculty to care

By Clarence Spigner

The June 19, 1991 edition of *USA Today* and the Aug. 5, 1991 edition of *Sports Illustrated* reported an ongoing problem we should all be acutely aware of: Black student-athletes too often don't get diplomas.

Here at the University, only 22 percent of black male basketball players graduate after five years, compared with 80 percent of white male basketball players. Such dismal race-specific graduation rates, especially in the revenue-generating sports, are cause for concern. Given that this is still an academic institution and not a sports farm, an appropriate question is: What is the faculty's role in ameliorating these embarrassing graduation rates?

Several academic periodicals, such as *Black Issues in Higher Education*, *Academe* (the bulletin of the American Association of University Professors) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, have consistently raised the issue of faculty's apathy regarding this issue. Is faculty paralysis also endemic at the University? Except for a 1988 report titled *Intercollegiate Athletics Committee Academic Performance Study*, which was kept secret apparently for public relations reasons, meaningful faculty involvement in sports reform seems less than substantive.

The *USA Today* graduation poll and NCAA data presented in *Sports Illustrated* show nationwide — and locally — that far too few black basketball players graduate. We should not have to wait for the national press to inform us about our football players as well.

It is common knowledge that student-athletes must spend too much valuable study time practicing, traveling, playing, and recovering physically and emotionally from sports. Research by Kathleen Ellickson, a professor of psychiatry at Ohio State University, found that sports, rather than academics, sapped the enthusiasm of college students.

Sports reformists point out that faculty apathy has allowed athletic departments to control and segregate student-athletes. Murry Sperber, associate professor of English and American Studies at Indiana University, has written that some athletic personnel are allowed to operate with more autonomy than university faculty.

Robert Atwell, president of the American Council on Education, has pointed out that some faculty athletic representatives function more as apologists and promoters for the athletic enterprise with "... choice tickets, close-in parking, and free flights to away games." We can include free meals as well.

The contradictions between big-money sports and the receiving of a quality education are well known to faculty, staff and students. In response, at least student leaders at the University have taken it upon themselves to evaluate the extent to which academic integrity is being maintained here.

For example: In May 1986, Ron Larsen, a graduate student in sociology, conducted research on the retention of minority students. In a report titled *Summary of the Report on Minority Students at the University of Oregon*, Larsen found two-thirds of the University's black students were male, and about a third of all black students were athletes. So much for the University's self-serving claims about increasing diversity.

In January 1990, ASUO President Andy Clark undertook his own investigation of student-athletes. After repeated stonewalling from University administrators, Clark brought in sports sociologist Harry Edwards for a series of campus lectures. Local television station KEZI taped an exclusive interview with Edwards, but to my knowledge, that interview was never aired.

This year, ASUO student leaders Brian Hoop, Eric Ward, Bobby Lee and others spent most of spring and summer quarters, and now fall, researching in the University archives for information on race- and gender-specific student-athlete graduation rates. Larsen, Clark and these present student leaders are doing work the University administrators should be doing!

If students can give their valuable time and devote such physical and emotional labor on behalf of student-athletes, where is the faculty? Are students more concerned about academic integrity than we are?

*Clarence Spigner is an assistant professor in the Department of School and Community Health and former chairman of the University's Council for Minority Education.*

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