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The Educational Value of Athletics: A Mission-Based Paradigm

By Jonathan R. Alger



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In Short

- The current Division I athletics model is financially unstable and overly commercialized for many colleges and universities, creating an opportunity to recenter college sports on education rather than revenue.
- A growing movement, including convenings at American University and work by the Sports Major Collective, is exploring sports performance as a legitimate academic major, minor, or certificate program grounded in the liberal arts.
- High-level athletic participation builds widely valued outcomes—critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, problem solving, resilience, and wellness—that mirror other performance disciplines and are prized by employers.
- Treating sports performance as an academic field would require rigorous curricula, assessment, and faculty-level roles for some coaches, with models drawing on performing arts and military academies.
- Such programs could broaden access beyond varsity athletes, support nonrevenue and Olympic sports, and help reconnect higher education with a skeptical public by highlighting tangible life and civic benefits.

Big-time varsity athletics in higher education are at a crossroads. Costs are soaring, and commercial influences dominate the headlines. The transfer system for student-athletes has become like the Wild West, and the notion of amateurism seems to be dead in the age of revenue sharing and name, image and likeness payments.

THE TIME HAS COME FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

Concerns that the Division I system of athletics is broken and has lost its way due to rampant greed and commercialism are not new (Duderstadt, 2003; Moyon & Thelin, 2024), but the current model has reached a point that is financially unstable and



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unsustainable for many universities in a difficult budgetary environment. One option for university leaders is to continue to tinker around the edges of a system that seems largely beyond their control. While it is true that financial, media, and commercial interests seem to dominate and dictate decision making in Division I—especially at the Power 4 institutions—this is not the case for athletics at most colleges and universities (including even some in Division I, as well as those at other competitive levels). Accordingly, I believe this inflection point in intercollegiate athletics provides a different kind of opportunity for some institutions to embrace a new approach that is capable of clearly recognizing, rewarding, and assessing the educational benefits of high-level athletic training and participation.

The time has come to address the question, Why do we incorporate high-level athletics into institutions of higher learning? We must then consider grounding the answer squarely and unapologetically in our educational mission. A growing national movement is shaping an answer that would ensure high-level sport performance is treated as a powerful form of learning worthy of academic recognition and credit. This article is intended to set forth a philosophical and practical argument for this approach from a president's perspective, rather than to provide specific recommendations on a proposed curriculum. As noted below, faculty experts at various institutions have begun to create detailed frameworks for curricular approaches that bring this concept to life.

In October 2025, in conjunction with the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (founded to ensure the primacy of the educational mission with regard to intercollegiate athletics, and of which I am a member), American University (AU) hosted a national convening on this topic. It was a continuation of a series of working meetings among higher education experts who are committed to exploring this idea. These meetings included the Sports Major

Collective, a group of academics and professionals who have been studying the viability of sports performance as an academic major and sharing ideas with academic and athletic leaders (Gluckman, 2025). Recent developments in research, pedagogy, technology, and patterns of human relationships have converged to add significant momentum to this discussion. The idea of recognizing the academic value of sports participation is not a new concept (Kilbourne, 1994). However, it has taken on increased urgency with the runaway spending in Division I athletics and the pressures on institutions to invest more and more money on a small number of so-called revenue-generating sports.

A MISSION-BASED PARADIGM: INTEGRATING SPORTS MORE MEANINGFULLY INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

A mission-based paradigm for high-level athletics in the higher education setting is undergirded first and foremost by a thoughtful understanding of the evolution of curriculum in response to changing needs and circumstances in society. Faculty experts have pointed out that the definition of what counts as part of a liberal arts education is not static; it has in fact shifted dramatically over time (Matz, 2022; Rudolph, 1962; Trogden & Matz, 2025; Veysey, 1965). For example, over a century ago, other performance-based disciplines, such as dance, music, and theater, gradually became accepted and respected majors in the academy after starting as extracurricular activities (Trogden & Matz, 2025). Like other academic disciplines, these performance-based programs include a mix of theory and application or practice (Matz, 2020). For this reason, the AU convening included discussion of these other disciplines and the parallels to and lessons learned from fields of study that have a

strong emphasis on high-level human performance, including how curricular requirements have been developed and assessed over time.

Current trends in technology are also converging in ways that make a new paradigm feasible. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly changing how we teach and learn. AI and smartphones make all sorts of information, big data, and subject matter content instantly attainable at our fingertips. This incredibly sophisticated technology cannot, however, replace the experience of when actual humans perform music live, evoke strong human connections and emotions through live theater, or compete in live athletic events. As a result, life in the digital age is spurring a renewed interest in disciplines focused on high-level human performance. As I have learned with my personal trainer, there might be apps that can suggest workout routines and even try to motivate me, but at the end of the day I still must put in the hard work of exercising my own muscles to see the results.

Reflecting further on today's technology that impacts students, it is worth noting that e-sports (and related gaming programs) represent a fast-growing type of academic program precisely because such activities are seen as producing a variety of skill sets that translate into 21st-century careers. Given that such programs often appeal to young men in particular, these programs may help to address the growing gender imbalance in higher education, with fewer men opting for college. If e-sports (simulating athletic competition) can be considered a legitimate major, then why not the real thing?

From scientific and health perspectives, the mind-body connection has become a central focus of higher education in recent years. Different forms of human intelligence and knowing that involve different parts of the brain have been recognized. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is one of the core intelligences outlined in Howard Gardner's (1983) landmark book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. In addition, due to increased recognition of the interrelationship among mental, emotional, and physical health, there has been an overall emphasis on health and wellness to optimize student performance in and outside the classroom, and significant resources devoted to counseling and mental health services. The relationship between the arts and physical well-being is being developed and studied through the emerging field of neuroarts (Fleming, 2024). This relationship bears similarities to the interdisciplinary relationship of

high-level athletic performance and activity to mental acuity and wellness.

HIGH-IMPACT LEARNING AND SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Higher education is also being transformed by a growing emphasis on the development of certain skills and attributes—regardless of academic major—that prepare students for success in careers and in life. Research conducted by organizations such as the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) through its Employer-Educator Compact has demonstrated that skills and attributes in college graduates valued by employers include critical thinking, communications, leadership, teamwork, work ethic, time management, problem solving, and grit and resilience, among others (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2010a; Finley, 2025). Many of these learning outcomes are reflected in the widely respected VALUE rubrics framework developed by the AAC&U (2010b). In 2023, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Educational Testing Service issued a report noting that “the current paradigm for defining and certifying educational attainment in the U.S. is outdated” and that students are developing valuable skills through learning from experiences such as internships, volunteerism, community service, and sports participation that do not neatly fit into traditional academic disciplines (Liu et al., 2023). The report reflects the growth of a movement to recognize competency-based education that is not based solely on seat time in classrooms but rather on recognizing education acquired through a wide variety of means.

Faculty members in recent years have been reworking syllabi to incorporate “high-impact” learning practices that build these skills and attributes, and assessment offices are analyzing student learning outcomes with these skills and attributes in mind. The high-impact practices that form the core of engaged learning include opportunities to apply theory to practice in real-world situations through experiences such as internships and study abroad. Of course, student-athletes are very familiar with this list of skills and attributes, because it is the same skill set they utilize in their sports-related training (Weight & Harry, 2025). It is no wonder, therefore, that a high percentage of chief executive officers have backgrounds in high-level competitive athletics. The



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number is particularly striking for women (Weight & Harry, 2025).

As technology revolutionizes the world of work and the ways in which humans relate to one another, we, as a society, are also grappling with increased polarization along political, economic, and educational lines. Within higher education, these trends have led to a renewed focus on the need for civic education and civil discourse as we strive to build bridges across our many differences (such as political viewpoints, race, religion, and socioeconomic status). Like the performing arts, sports provide a rare avenue that brings people together across all sorts of differences. In an orchestra, chorus, or athletic team, when individuals need to work with and rely on teammates for their ultimate success, they learn to see how their skills and talents can complement and combine with those of the people around them to create something greater than any one individual could accomplish alone. With their emphasis on friendly competition and interaction with other people, there is inherently a community-building aspect of sports that can be incredibly valuable in overcoming isolation and polarization.

Athletic competition is also premised on rules of engagement that set clear boundaries on how participants treat one another. Treating opponents with respect becomes ingrained when participants know that they might have to face those same opponents again in the future. The same practices and habits of mind that help individuals learn how to live peacefully in community with one another can thus be reinforced with and through athletics. It is little wonder that the Olympic Games were originally conceived in part as a way of channeling competition and promoting peace among tribal-like groups.

As a former university president who strives to produce engaged citizens with the skills and experience to work across all sorts of divides, I can see the clear value in the lessons learned through sports participation, particularly in our highly polarized world. The Greek term *phronesis* captures the idea of practical wisdom that helps individuals learn how to act and respond in different types of situations—including conflict. There are practical and moral benefits to treating sports performance as a legitimate field of study, as it can build coping and conflict resolution skills, confidence, and character.

For all these reasons, the time is ripe for reimagining the relationship of high-level athletic participation to higher education (Matz, 2022). If we view high-level athletic participation as a powerful and transformative form of learning that can improve the skills and attributes on which we are focused across the curriculum, then the conversation about its place within colleges and universities suddenly takes on a very different tone. Instead of treating athletic participation as a mere extracurricular activity for transitory commercial or entertainment purposes, it becomes another emerging field deserving of serious study that produces lifelong benefits and develops skills and attributes that contribute directly to long-term adaptability and lifelong learning.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

Even if we agree that high-level sports performance could be a legitimate area of academic focus, we still must grapple with difficult questions of how to build such programs in ways that are consistent with the norms and standards of the academy. As is true with other disciplines, there does not need to be a “one size fits all” approach. Different institutions might

experiment with a major (e.g., as is already happening at Southern Virginia University and will happen at Lindsey Wilson University), a minor, a concentration, a certificate, or perhaps independent study in sports performance. As is true with music, dance, or theater performance, credit could be awarded for both theoretical study and its application in practice. The human body would essentially be treated as a site of learning, and such academic programs would incorporate structured mentoring and supervision, reflection, and rigorous assessment of clearly articulated student learning outcomes. The goal would not be to prepare students to be professional athletes (although perhaps a small subset might pursue such careers), but to develop life skills that will translate into many different potential jobs and careers—as is the case with many other liberal arts disciplines that can produce skills such as critical thinking, communications, and problem solving.

Sports performance can also be integrated with a wide variety of emerging and related academic fields to produce interdisciplinary programs that fit and reflect the strengths and opportunities available at different institutions. For example, curricula could connect sports performance with health science, neuroscience, kinesiology, nutrition, dietetics, business, law, communications, data analytics, and civic leadership. Indeed, many related programs (e.g., sports management and sports law) already exist in the academy and could be combined with or complement a sports performance program. The new academic programs contemplated here could provide additional options for student-athletes and others interested in rigorous study of athletics or sports science, but by no means would or should all student-athletes choose this particular academic path (any more than all students interested in music necessarily major in music performance).

An institution like AU with a strong historic emphasis on civic engagement might choose to highlight how sports performance can bolster learning outcomes in that area. Other institutions might emphasize the development of skills in entrepreneurship or data analytics through interdisciplinary programs involving some level of sports performance. At a time when transfers are rampant among some categories of student-athletes (e.g., who are seeking more lucrative “name, image, and likeness” deals), colleges and universities will also need to grapple with questions of how to evaluate credits and participation from other

institutions. Existing National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules focus on playing time eligibility on varsity teams rather than on the specific majors students select and thus should not be directly impacted, although evolving NCAA limitations on an individual’s varsity team participation would need to be kept in mind if such playing time or participation is also incorporated as part of an academic program (e.g., for something akin to internship credit).

As with any emerging academic field, faculty members would need to take the lead in designing and testing curricula. Bridget Trogden and Lou Matz (2025), two participants in the summit at AU, recently outlined some of the possibilities, including how they can be grounded firmly in the liberal arts. For example, they suggest treating playing time like an internship (a similar argument might be made for practice time if it involves sufficient supervision and reflection). They also note that sports performance could administratively be housed with other performing arts programs because of their similar structures, or it could alternatively be set up as stand-alone interdisciplinary programs. At AU, as a starting point, we convened a group of professors from a variety of academic units to envision a new minor in sports performance.

This article is not intended to describe all the possible models for a sports performance–based major, minor, or program—instead, it is intended to encourage interested institutions and faculty to start this conversation in light of their particular contexts. This work should be informed by the growing body of research on how to ensure that “high-impact practices” provide educational benefits that translate into career and life skills (Kuh, 2008). At AU, for example, faculty are currently building a new kind of transcript that will identify and assess skills being developed through courses and experiential learning opportunities. This new transcript will help students understand how to articulate and apply life lessons learned from high-level sports participation, while signaling those skills for prospective employers.

Rigorous assessment of student learning outcomes will need to be an essential component of successful programs for accreditation purposes and to ensure that they are taken seriously by faculty, prospective students and parents, employers, and graduate schools. The door is open for fresh thinking about the academic value of sports performance during this time when the role of accreditation in fostering

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curricular innovation is under serious scrutiny. Of course, care would need to be taken to avoid past scandals, including when student-athletes at some institutions were essentially funneled into majors that lacked real academic substance and rigor (Kuhn & Rubin, 2022). The U.S. military academies provide potential examples of institutions that have long incorporated sports training into the curriculum with rigor, accountability, and assessment in support of their educational mission. At AU, we were well situated to offer such a model because our student-athletes have historically performed extremely well both in the classroom and in their respective athletic pursuits. Indeed, in fall 2025, the all-athlete grade point average (GPA) at AU surpassed the all-undergraduate GPA by approximately 0.15.

Ideally, such academic programs would also be open to individuals of many different backgrounds and abilities (i.e., not just athletes on varsity teams). For example, students who play club sports that meet certain criteria (e.g., having a qualified coach, regular practices, an intercollegiate competition schedule) could be included. In addition, there are students who might participate at a high level in sports not offered at the varsity or club level by their institutions (e.g., a figure skater or equestrian) or students with disabilities who are Paralympians on the regional, national, or international stage. Moreover, the new educational approach to high-level sports performance could also strengthen the interest in and demand for participation in sports that are not traditionally viewed as commercially valuable for universities. So-called Olympic or nonrevenue sports at the college level could benefit from a new emphasis on their educational value and relevance to institutions and students,

rather than being viewed as costly varsity teams that are vulnerable to being cut in tight budget times.

This approach also has implications for the roles of coaches. Could some coaches be treated as faculty members? If so, how would they be appropriately credentialed? Many coaches have long talked about their role as educators and as developers of talent that transcends sports. A new approach to sports performance in the academy could create new opportunities for such individuals and collaborations with faculty to improve learning. Activity is well underway on this front. The United States Center for Coaching Excellence (2022), through its National Committee for Accreditation of Coaching Education, is expanding its scope as a source of accreditation for sports performance and related curriculum. Coaches' contracts would also need to be revised to focus more heavily on educational goals and metrics rather than simply on wins and losses. While this model might not apply at the largest and most well-funded Division I programs that rely heavily on media rights and related revenues, it will be of interest to many other institutions that are not able to spend such large amounts on a few varsity teams.

CONCLUSION

These kinds of conversations force institutions of higher education to grapple with fundamental questions about what counts as knowledge and learning. At a time when the public seems skeptical of the value and relevance of higher education, such conversations can also provide an opportunity to bridge the gap with people who think of higher

education as elitist and out of touch. The status quo for college sports may not be sustainable, but further development of a more clearly mission-focused model in which sports performance is taken seriously for its educational virtues could create a future that is more exciting and innovative

than anyone is currently imagining for a large number of institutions and student-athletes.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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