

**Beer and Circus:  
How Big-Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education**

*By Murray Sperber*

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Anyone possessing a vested interest in higher education, particularly orientation professionals and student affairs staff, would be well served to read this book depicting the status of undergraduate education in institutions offering a high profile, NCAA Division I football and men's basketball program.

The author employed personal interviews and research questionnaires during the

mid-1990's to examine the relationship existing between intercollegiate athletics and student life and undergraduate education on various college campuses. A majority of respondents (1,312) were from NCAA Division I institutions, but 581 responses were from NCAA Division III campuses across America. Hence, a means to compare student life and the quality of undergraduate education in opposed athletic settings was established. Respondents also included representation from the four primary subcultures found on college campuses, namely the collegiate, academic, vocational, and rebel factions.

A recurrent, core theme throughout Sperber's book was the declining quality of undergraduate education on the part of elements who were enrolled at institutions desiring to obtain a national research reputation and/or offer esteemed graduate education programs. In such cases, viable resources, both financial and personnel, are diverted away from undergraduate education in order to pursue research prestige or status nationally and provide quality instruction at the graduate school level. However, to offset a compromise in the quality of undergraduate education, but maintain a steady and necessary influx of tuition dollars into operational budgets, many universities used athletics or big-time college sports in a social, entertainment context to help appease undergraduate consumers in lieu of their eroding educational opportunities.

The books' focus was aimed at showing the connections between alcohol and sports at selected major universities, and subsequently, the general neglect of academic rigor and undergraduate education at such schools. In comparison, undergraduate education appeared to be flourishing in those smaller institutions affording their participants a liberal arts education because valuable resources are prioritized to help insure quality undergraduate experience and athletics have maintained their original status as a viable educational tool to aid and abet the development of the whole student.

Part one, the first six chapters of Sperber's book, examined the origins or rise of the beer-and-circus atmosphere on college campuses. Part two, entitled "Collegiate Life: Less Educationally Filling," detailed the neglect of undergraduate education and the entrenchment of beer-and-circus on many higher education campuses across America. Part three, beer-and-circus rules, detailed the prevalence of alcohol surrounding intercollegiate life and the significant power big-time athletics wield in higher education circles. The author concluded his book with what should happen versus what probably will happen relative to beer-and-circus environments on college campuses. In terms of what should happen, the author offered several recommendations to enhance the quality of undergraduate education and initiate genuine reform of intercollegiate athletics. The following proposals represent Sperber's list of suggestions for fundamental change:

1. Large, public research universities must slim down, losing millions of students and, in a trim mode, offer quality undergraduate education to all students who legitimately qualify for entrance;
2. Universities should separate pure research from graduate programs;
3. Hire, promote, and reward faculty primarily for teaching undergraduates, and very secondarily, for research, with some of their research devoted to pedagogy;
4. Abolish teaching methods that turn undergraduates into passive receptacles;

- emphasize interactive, inquiry-based learning;
5. Require all undergraduates to attain a minimum score on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) before they receive their bachelor's degree; and
  6. End athletic scholarships and allow only need-based grants.

What will happen? History would tend to indicate that major and/or significant athletic reform measures in big-time college athletic programs are unlikely. The commercialism, professionalism, and entertainment aspects of sport will, in all probability, continue unabated. If such a trend does indeed continue and if we do not experience any significant changes in our approach to undergraduate education, the author hypothesized that a future book title may read: "Beer and Circus: How College Sports Destroyed Undergraduate Education at Big-Time Us."