

The Faculty Council of Rice University
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May 17, 2004

Mr. E. William Barnett, Chairman
Board of Trustees
Rice University
411 Allen Center, Campus

Re: Board Study of Athletics

Dear Bill:

Thank you and the Board for allowing the faculty to express their opinions of the McKinsey report through your web site. As the elected leader of the 547 voting faculty at Rice I want to summarize some remaining concerns based on two years of Faculty Council's study of athletics at Rice, my participation in one of the McKinsey focus groups, my reading of the final report, and input from many faculty members.

The mission of Rice University is teaching, learning and research. I strongly support this opening sentence from your cover letter on the McKinsey report. It gives me hope that the Board interprets much of the McKinsey work in the way that the faculty feels is important. Thus, I will restrict my attention to only a few vague aspects of the McKinsey statements.

While the faculty have diverse views of several issues about athletics there is one subject where their record is unanimous. More than a year ago Faculty Council passed a resolution calling for the immediate end of the current athletic admissions process where a coach can override the majority recommendation of the faculty sub-committee. That resolution was published in our Proceedings and in the Thresher. To date not a single faculty member has contacted me opposing that position. In my opinion the McKinsey report has under emphasized this critical central issue of faculty control over academic standards for all students.

Academically weak students may be more tempted to cheat. Cheating at Rice can not be tolerated since the Honor Code is central to teaching and learning at Rice. The McKinsey report clearly downplays Honor Code violations by citing the small number of cases and referring to faculty concerns as anecdotal. Each alleged violation can involve hundreds of hours of investigation by the Honor Council members and represents an undue burden on those high quality students willing to serve the University in reviewing each case.

There are statistics and there are probabilities associated with athletes and Honor Council violations. I have contacted an expert on probability theory and he finds the probability

calculations involving athletics and Honor Code violations, appended to my last communication, to be valid. I strongly suspect that the current special admissions process for athletics contributes to cheating.

The McKinsey report addresses the University's stakeholders. Yet it seems to present them as having equal stakes in evaluating the future of athletics at Rice. Given your stated mission for Rice I believe that it is the close involvement of the faculty in all aspects of academic life at Rice that will mainly form the important future standing of the University. The faculty input on the numerous aspects of athletics should be given serious consideration.

While the Board is leaning toward continuing at the Division 1 level it is clear from our poll that the majority of the faculty views such continuation as unacceptable and likely to fail. Maybe this is the time to experiment with a new approach. Perhaps the Board can envision a middle ground that will provide bold leadership for the rest of the nation.

I believe that your practice of meeting with Faculty Council and the President for a luncheon meeting each semester has significantly helped the Council see more of the broader picture that the Board must address. I was appalled to see copies of email from a faculty member distributing Board contact information and encouraging large numbers of people to directly contact Board members. That clearly is a very bad way to address complex issues, but we do not seem to have a good way for selected faculty to regularly provide advice to Board sub-committees. The Faculty Council's ongoing two year study of shared governance, funded by President Gillis, has shown that some comparable institutions have found it beneficial to have a Board level "Academic Priorities Committee" that involves a few faculty members in long range planning issues. We will continue to study these and related issues this summer and fall and hope to identify better decision making processes.

In closing, I wish to again emphasize the faculty desire for changing the current athletic admissions process. Faculty Council thanks the Board for having the wisdom to gather the vast amount of data provided by the McKinsey report and to seek input from the full Rice community. The faculty shares your stated mission for Rice University. We are confident that the Board is working hard to reach a decision that will make athletics at Rice a shining example for the rest of the nation to follow.

Sincerely,

Ed Akin
Speaker of Faculty Council

Cc: Malcolm Gillis
JEA