

The disconnect on UK's campus - Sports thrives education suffers

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The University of Kentucky struggles with a funding crisis, while attention is riveted on a sports story.

What else is new?

The latest dispatches from the flagship take us down memory lane, all the way back to 1988.

Whitney Houston tops the charts. And President David Roselle faces not only a drastic erosion in UK's ability to financially compete for faculty and a basketball scandal (remember, \$1,000 fell from a UK package to a recruit?) but also a hostile governor.

So, what did Roselle do? Hit up the athletics association for \$2.5 million. He also tapped the medical center's surplus to support general education.

The next year, sports coughed up \$1.5 million to academics before settling into the \$1.2 million that still flows each year from UK athletics into scholarships for non-athletes.

In the years since 1988, tuition has increased almost 500 percent from \$680 to \$4,061 a semester.

The athletics budget has grown 389 percent from \$13.7 million to \$67 million.

UK's budget has swelled from around \$600 million to \$2 billion.

UK athletics' contribution to education has shrunk by 52 percent.

Anyone sense an opportunity here?

Last week produced a familiar mixed message: The school is hiring a men's basketball coach who will make \$31.65 million over eight years but can't afford to give faculty and staff a raise for the second year in a row.

On Friday, UK President Lee T. Todd Jr. sent out a campus memo announcing no salary increases, that UK must take another 2 percent cut in state funding and that more cuts are almost certain because of the recession's effect on revenues.

In his memo, Todd went to some pains to "set the record straight" in light of all the recent "media attention" to the men's basketball program. UK is "one of very few public universities" that has an entirely self-supporting athletics program, Todd wrote, and

"while most athletic programs drain money from their universities, UK Athletics contributes over \$1 million annually to the general scholarship fund."

All true. All commendable.

Still, how can you ask the taxpayers of a poor state to pony up more for higher education without also asking a money-making sports machine that's under your control to sacrifice more to serve its university's higher purpose?

After all, without UK there would be no UK sports.

Todd will soon present an operating budget that includes a 5 percent tuition increase.

At an earlier time when campus morale was sinking, Roselle made a powerful statement by enlisting sports in UK's real mission. It was also a practical move; a couple million dollars went a lot further back then. Roselle had a big impact despite his short tenure, and not just because he also snagged a really good basketball coach.

Championship college sports and top-flight academics and research are not mutually exclusive. The University of North Carolina has proven that, yet again.

While we'd put Wildcat hoops tradition up against the Tar Heels any day, North Carolina has benefitted far more than Kentucky from a tradition of strong public funding and committed leadership at the state and campus levels.

When he became president almost eight years ago, Todd inspired a vision of harnessing the popularity of Kentucky basketball to serve a higher purpose for the state that worships it.

If he still thinks that's an option, now would be an opportune time.

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