

UK should get more of athletics program's wealth

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Author/Byline: TOM EBLEN HERALD-LEADER COLUMNIST

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John Calipari is an excellent basketball coach. He seems capable of attracting top talent. He has handled his first public appearances as spiritual leader of the Wildcat Nation with aplomb.

So why the public grumbling about his eight-year, \$31.65 million contract to coach the University of Kentucky's men's basketball team?

Tuition for UK students has skyrocketed as faculty and staff salaries have stagnated. Academic programs and services are being cut. The General Assembly charged UK with becoming a Top 20 research university but has refused to provide the money to make it happen.

In this atmosphere, there's only one word for Calipari's compensation: obscene.

I'm not blaming Calipari or UK Athletics Director Mitch Barnhart. I'm also not blaming their colleagues around the nation who spend ever-more obscene sums to create winning college basketball and football programs. They're just playing in the sandboxes that state legislatures, university presidents and boards of trustees have given them.

The problem is that universities and the people who oversee them have lost sight of the reason college athletics exist. They are there to further the educational mission of the university, not to become entertainment empires unto themselves.

A recent Herald-Leader editorial helped put things into perspective. It recalled how, 21 years ago, then-UK President David Roselle dealt with tough times by getting the university's athletics association to pay \$2.5 million to support general education. The figure dropped to \$1.5 million the next year, then to \$1.2 million each year after that.

Since 1988, tuition has risen almost 500 percent, and UK's athletics budget has grown 389 percent, from \$13.7 million to \$67 million. Athletics' financial contribution to the larger university has remained flat, at \$1.2 million, which goes to scholarships for non-athletes.

The editorial prompted an interesting letter to the editor from Joe Peek, UK's Gatton Endowed Chair in International Banking and Financial Economics.

Peek noted that UK's "self-supporting" athletics program doesn't account for facilities, utilities, maintenance and other services the university provides to athletics. And because UK athletics wouldn't exist without UK, he suggested the university charge athletics a

"franchise fee."

I would suggest another approach. It's an older form of accounting that would put into proper perspective the relationship between the university and its athletics machine: the biblical tithe.

I'm not trying to mix church and state, although many would argue that basketball is Kentucky's secular religion. The Bible, the Quran and other ancient religious texts offer many tried-and-true approaches to life that believers and non-believers can find valuable. They are, after all, the wisdom of the ages.

University athletics programs operate on a modern American ethic best described as: "I bring in the money, so it's mine."

Based on this ethic, big-revenue college sports spend lavishly on coaches, facilities and perks. Sharing resources with non-revenue sports or the larger university is seen more as an act of charity than an obligation.

The tithe is based on the concept that man owes 10 percent of his "increase" to God because without God there would be no man - just as without the University of Kentucky there would be no Wildcat basketball or football.

This approach would have UK Athletics contribute \$6.7 million this year to other university purposes, rather than \$1.2 million. As the success of athletics programs increased, so would the "tithe."

I can already hear the wailing and gnashing of teeth from the high priests of our secular religion. Successful sports teams provide many benefits to a university, these people will say. Of course they do; that's why they should get to keep 90 percent of their revenue.

How could UK possibly do this unless other National Collegiate Athletic Association programs did, too? It would put Big Blue at a competitive disadvantage with other universities.

Actually, what it might do is start a much-needed national conversation about the proper relationship between universities and the athletic industrial complex they and the TV networks have created.

Kentucky officials like to think of themselves as leaders in education reform. Here's an opportunity for reform. Go lead.

Reach columnist Tom Eblen at (859) 231-1415 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 1415, or at teblen@herald-leader.com. Read and comment on his blog, [The Bluegrass & Beyond](http://TheBluegrass&Beyond.com), at Kentucky.com.

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