It is time to have a national discussion regarding our investment in football and what its place should be within our educational system.

As football’s popularity and financial influence have increased, the ethos of many institutions has evolved to where the game has become more about the end result of winning than the process of education and learning.

If they are to successfully meet the many challenges of an increasingly competitive and global economic environment, college and university boards need to seriously consider the educational return on investment of their extracurricular programs and restructure their funding accordingly.
It is well past time that America had an open, honest discussion about the role of football in our nation in the 21st century. Higher education should foster that discussion, and college and university board members should drive and direct it.

For more than 300 years, higher education has provided leadership on the issues and challenges of the day, including the part that athletics plays in our educational system and our larger society. Clearly, how we conduct our college and university athletic programs provides an example that filters down through not only our entire educational system but also thousands of community sports programs. Further, our colleges and universities are not only training the teachers, coaches, principals, and superintendents of the future. They are also conducting the research that informs and influences educational policies, procedures, and priorities at all levels.

With its outsized influence on our culture and our educational system, football is the indisputable driver of the athletics enterprise at all levels. Football’s sheer scope, engrained tradition, enormous entertainment appeal, and economic clout make it the “elephant in the room” in the debate regarding the role of sports in America.

For example, it is no longer uncommon for the budget of a major college football program to exceed $20 million or even $30 million, with revenues exceeding $50 million, as noted in Forbes magazine. And, the New York Times has reported that nine out of the 2013 top-10 most-watched television programs were National Football League (NFL) games. (Small wonder many people call it “King Football.”)

We look to board members, as leaders of the flagship institutions of our entire educational system, to provide broad cultural leadership and direction. In other words, boards’ responsibility to provide educational leadership goes beyond the college campus and extends to every corner of our educational system, and indeed our society generally. In short, this is a seminal moment for college and university leaders. It is a national teaching opportunity that we cannot afford to waste. If higher education leaders do not drive this national debate, who will?

We must have a national discussion regarding whether our enormous educational and community investment in football continues to make sense in a world that has changed vastly since the sport was incorporated into the fabric of American education in the late 1800s. This is not to say that football does not have a place in our society. It does. The question is whether that place should continue to be within our educational system.

A CHANGING PLAYING FIELD
Some recent developments have pushed the issue of the role of football into the national spotlight. Several court cases that will have a major impact on the foundation of college athletics and the NCAA’s “amateurism” model are winding their way through the court system. And there is the NFL and the culture surrounding football, which has been under increasing scrutiny as it relates to issues such as
domestic abuse, bullying, sexism, and the use of performance-enhancing and pain-killing drugs.

Arguably, the single biggest development in sports over the past several years, however, has been the increased revelations regarding concussions. Every day it seems we see another story, piece of research, or new evidence regarding the damaging impact of football on the brain, affecting the entire range of football participants, from retired NFL players to youth football participants. Indeed, the NFL recently submitted to federal courts a report stating the league expects nearly one in three players to develop long-term cognitive problems, with symptoms appearing earlier than in the general population.

On the collegiate level, while issues such as academic fraud, growing athletic department deficits, and institutional control have been demanding and will continue to demand the attention of board members, the concussion issue has raised the issue of football’s impact on and place in the academy to a new level. It is now a moral issue.

Specifically, the moral dilemma that every board member must consider is this: If our educational system’s central purpose is education, the search for truth, and developing our nation’s most important resource, our young people, how does it help to sponsor and celebrate an activity that an increasing amount of research tells us is profoundly dangerous and debilitating? Isn’t the role and purpose of an educational institution to build and strengthen brains?

Granted, many well-meaning people and organizations are working, in good faith, on making the game safer. But even if the “damage dial” could be scaled back from nine on a scale of 10 to eight, that is still too dangerous. The very nature and core of the game are rooted in violence. The chances of changing its basic culture are marginal, at best.

In short, the evidence of the likelihood of young people sustaining brain trauma in football has become so strong that it demands the attention of every highschool board of education and college board of trustees in the nation. In fact, researchers at the Department of Veterans Affairs’ brain repository, studied the brain tissue of 128 former professional, semi-pro, college- and high-school-level football players. They found nearly 80 percent of them tested positive for CTE, a degenerative disease of the brain linked to a history of repetitive brain trauma. This is serious stuff.

And the long-term implications for the role that football will play in our educational system and our communities are significant. In the end, the questions we should all be asking ourselves are these: Should our schools and colleges be sponsoring activities that place young people’s brains at grave risk for the entertainment of the community? Or, stated more plainly, should our educational institutions be sponsoring and, indeed, celebrating an activity that “scrambles” young people’s brains?

Traditionally, the analysis of extracurricular spending in our schools and colleges has focused on a choice: between elite, interscholastic athletics on the one hand, and the arts on the other. While many people resist the notion of directly comparing the relative values of sports and the arts as educational resources, the fact is, when program cuts are required, priorities must be set and choices made. Without such comparison and evaluation, it is impossible to determine which investment is more effective.

In a perfect world, all extracurricular activities would be fully funded. But with politicians and education leaders making it clear that, for the foreseeable future, education funding will continue to be reduced, it’s painfully obvious that we do not live in a perfect world. That being the case, educational institutions at all levels will be forced to engage in a very contentious debate regarding how to allocate increasingly scarce resources.
dollars. In such an environment, the fundamental question is: Which extracurricular activities garner the best educational return on investment? And, true to their fiduciary responsibilities, college and university trustees, as educational and societal leaders, must seriously consider and weigh in on these issues.

**CONTEXT MATTERS**

This debate cannot take place in a vacuum. Because the responsibility of our educational institutions is to respond to the social and economic challenges facing our society by educating our populace to be able to effectively meet those challenges, the dialogue must occur against a larger backdrop. Specifically, three major constructs should be considered.

First, standards regarding what constitutes an education worthy of the 21st century and, as a result, the expectations of our schools and colleges to effectively deliver that type of education, are rising significantly. Second, those standards differ vastly from those that have driven educational policy and priorities of the past. And finally, there is the cold, hard reality that educational institutions must meet these rising standards and expectations in an environment of declining funding and resources—a trend that does not appear to be abating.

These constructs will define and influence our response to the fundamental challenge that we must meet if we are to achieve meaningful education reform. Specifically, we must be more efficient with our resources by developing curricular and teaching strategies that are more effective in instilling in students the skills necessary to succeed in the information-based, interrelated global economy and world culture of the 21st century.

Further, this discussion must take place against a backdrop that recognizes the fact that America’s economy has changed from one based on industrial might to one based on technology, creativity, collaboration, and innovation. That being the case, what does this mean as applied to educational funding and priorities? How will it impact our efforts to structure our educational institutions and curriculums to prepare our children to succeed in this changing and increasingly competitive global, economic, and geopolitical environment?

Open and honest debate of these issues is vital because we must make choices regarding the most effective way to invest increasingly limited educational resources. How can we determine which of those choices to pursue?

To answer that question for myself, I conducted an analysis of the return on educational investment of football versus music programs in our junior high and high schools. The analysis focused on four areas: individual personal and character development, learning and brain function of participants, impact on the school learning environment and culture, and the health of both the individual participant and the general public. I drew upon not only relevant research and data on both football and music’s impacts on those areas, but also on my extensive experience in both worlds as a former college and professional athlete, college athletic administrator, professor of sports administration, life-long musician, and founder and president of a music-related nonprofit organization.

**AN HONEST EVALUATION**

What did I find? Despite the widely held notion that football has an exceptional ability to build character traits such as discipline, persistence, and personal responsibility, the fact is that involvement in music can teach and build the same traits. Further, both activities can help children gain confidence, establish an
identity, and learn and practice tolerance. But there is also the issue of whether football’s “win at all costs” mentality actually teaches positive lessons in sportsmanship, honesty, and integrity. As football’s popularity and financial influence have increased, the ethos of far too many programs has evolved to where the game has become more about the end result of winning than the process of education and learning.

This is not to say that football cannot teach valuable lessons. But as the financial stakes have risen, leading to an increased emphasis on winning, it can be argued that football’s potential as a teaching and educational tool has declined in inverse proportion. Because of that excessive focus on winning, football’s potential to teach the creative decision-making and problem-solving skills so vital for success in today’s creative, interrelated global economy and world community has been diminished as adults have come to dominate every decision associated with the game. The game has become “too important” to leave any decision making to the kids.

In contrast, individual creativity is at the core of music programs. Music is not about winning, at least not nearly to the same degree as football. Given that neither its financial impact nor the newsmedia coverage it generates comes close to that of football, it has retained a process oriented, creativity-driven focus. In short, football has become more about the end result (winning), while music remains more about the process (education). Because football’s primary justification for inclusion in our educational system is that it is “about education,” this is of serious concern.

Regarding the impact of these activities on learning and brain function, it is clear that both football and music, as well as other extracurricular activities, can increase a young person’s level of engagement in school and college, leading to higher GPA’s and better graduation rates. A 2009 study of New York City public schools found that those in the top third of graduation rates had 40 percent more faculty, physical space, and classroom space dedicated to the arts than those in the bottom third. A growing body of research also shows that playing music has a very direct impact on math, writing, logic, reading, and foreign language skills. Meanwhile, participation in football yields very few, if any, discernable academic skills, knowledge, or intellectual benefits.

Further, football is an activity that has a very narrow participation impact. More than half of students (girls) cannot, for all practical purposes, participate. And of the remaining students who can, only a small percentage are big enough, strong enough, or fast enough to play. This, coupled with the fact that football is not an activity that can be practiced for a lifetime, severely limits its potential as a lifelong learning tool. That is crucial, because one of the most important functions of our educational system is to promote and teach a love of lifelong learning. Not only is music open to all, but once learned, it is a skill that can be practiced for a lifetime. This leads to the conclusion that, in the area of learning and brain function, music is superior as an educational investment.

We must also consider the impact of these two activities on the school community and learning environment. While football may be seen as a powerful community-building activity, music has that same potential. But music, as a universal language, offers far greater potential as a platform for international educational opportunities and arts-integrated learning opportunities—things that football, as a distinctly American construct, simply cannot provide. In an age of an increasingly interrelated global economy and community, it is important that we instill in our children the skills necessary to navigate different cultures in this new reality. Music is far superior to football as a platform from which to provide the international cultural experiences necessary to develop such skills and understanding.
And what about the impact on health, both individual and public? Of all the areas discussed, this may be the simplest in terms of framing the debate, as it boils down to two issues. First, should our schools and colleges concentrate the most resources on an activity for a small slice of elite athletes while pushing all other students to the sidelines as spectators? Or should the role of sports be to provide broad-based participation opportunities in activities that people can practice for a lifetime for purposes of public health in one of the most obese nations on the planet? Second, how can any educational institution, with a clear conscience, sponsor an activity that is detrimental to brain function? Put another way, should we support programs that serve as “vitamins” for brains or programs that “scramble” them?

Finally, should we continue to enable and empower coaches and others to continue to “sell” the dream of football fame and fortune when the facts tell us that the chances of making a living playing it are exceedingly remote—while the likelihood of incurring life-altering physical injuries is exceedingly high? Is that the type of “educational” investment that we should be making in our children?

Driving this debate is the increasing amount of research on the connection between football and brain trauma, particularly among children and young adults. As suggested by the previously referenced studies, while the evidence of music’s positive impact on brain function (it strengthens the neural connections associated with learning) is increasing, the research on and analysis of football’s impact is trending in the opposite direction. The fact is, as much as we may love football and as much as its culture is ingrained in the fabric of our communities and educational institutions, we simply cannot continue to ignore these trends.

**DECISION MAKING FOR TODAY’S WORLD**

The stakes are too high to keep investing so much time, effort, and emotion in football simply because we have always done so. Does that type of investment make sense in today’s world? While it is fun to have a good football team that a school can rally around, the question is whether its entertainment value is enough to continue to justify our continued significant investment—often at the expense of other programs that clearly yield a far better educational return on investment.

The point of this essay is not to tear down football. This is about community values as reflected through educational policy and priorities. It is time for parents, community leaders, and educational decision makers, including college and university board members, to seriously consider the notion that, as an educational investment, football yields increasingly less value. It simply can no longer be denied that a compelling case can be made that music programs provide a far better return than football programs. If we are to successfully meet the many challenges of an increasingly competitive, global economic environment, we had better grasp that reality and rethink and restructure our nation’s educational priorities accordingly.

The days when such decisions could be made based solely on tradition and anecdotal evidence are over. The stakes are simply too high, and the costs of such narrowly focused decision making are far too great. With decreased resources comes a decrease in decisional margins of error. In other words, we have to make every dollar count.

In the end, one would hope that, with college and university board members providing the leadership in framing and debating this topic, the dialogue surrounding these issues and decisions will be more data-driven, reasoned, and honest at all levels of our educational system.
INSTITUTIONAL BRANDING THROUGH FOOTBALL: A NEW PLAYING FIELD

Many colleges and universities have long considered football an effective vehicle through which to build and strengthen their institutional brand. But here’s a question that every board member must consider: How do you build and enhance the brand of an educational institution by sponsoring, as a central component of your branding strategy, an activity that an increasing amount of research tells us is profoundly dangerous for student participants?

Boards should be cautious that, at some point, the evidence of the debilitating effects of football participation will become so clear, and the physical costs so great, public perception of colleges and universities that are willing to “sacrifice” students in the name of financial gain and branding purposes may shift. If institutions of higher education are so cavalier with the long-term health of their football athletes, what is to say that they won’t be similarly cavalier regarding the education, health, and well-being of all its students? Given the public’s increasing skepticism of the value of a college education in today’s world, another example of higher education being more about business and branding than education could come at great cost.

In fact, for an institution that is looking to significantly advance its educational brand, a case can be made that eliminating football shows far more educational vision, courage, and responsibility. Such a decision will help educational leadership get out ahead of what will be, despite the denials of the “football industrial complex,” a steady increase in the public’s distaste for a game that, while certainly entertaining, is intensely brutal and physically debilitating for students.—JG

ABOUT THE AUTHOR ➤

John Gerdy is a former all-American basketball player who served as associate commissioner of the Southeastern Conference. He is founder and executive director of Music For Everyone and the author of Ball or Bands: Football vs. Music as an Educational and Community Investment (Archway Publishing, 2014).

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