

Judith: Hello.

Charles: Hello.

Judith: And welcome to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy. This is a wonderful time to be a sports fan. Is basketball your thing? Or maybe football? Turn on the TV and you could probably find a college game. Universities have become commercial sports enterprises. We're a part of a breathless effort to land the best athletes. Many of our coaches are rich and famous. My guest today is Charlie Clotfelter. Charlie is a professor here at Duke and author of the book *Big-Time Sports in American Universities*. He says that commercialized college sports is the elephant in the room in higher education, and that there's this weird disconnect in that on one hand, sports have a massive effect, both on and off campus. They're embraced in some ways, but at the same time, sports is almost never included in a university's mission statement.

Judith: Welcome to Policy 360.

Charles: Thank you.

Judith: So, you have another book in front of you that you brought today, Charlie, other than the book that you wrote more recently. It's a big brown book that looks quite old, and it's a couple of inches fat, and looks antiquated. But, you've got some little stickies in it for a reason. Tell me what that book is and share with me why you brought that book today.

Charles: This was a report published in 1929, 90 years ago, by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning. It was on the question of college athletics. The thing that struck me when I first bumped across it when I was doing my research was that they were asking back in 1929 exactly the kind of question I wanted to ask. There was a little vignette described by the president of the foundation. He said, "Imagine a European visitor coming to one of our campuses and looking at all the great buildings and seeing the students and professors, and then coming on to the football stadium. This European visitor asks, 'What relation has this astonishing athletic display to the work of an intellectual agency like a university?' Basically, what's this doing here?"

Charles: Really, that turned out to be the aim of my book is to say, "What the heck is a university doing with a commercial sports entertainment industry sitting right in the middle of it?"

Judith: As a European, and not so much visitor anymore, but somebody who has come from Europe and looked at universities here in the United States, I confess that that was a question that arose for me when I first started setting a foot on college campuses, because that is, indeed, not the pairing we have in Europe. And so, I venture that the answer has something to do with money, but in your view, why do so many universities operate sports businesses that have almost nothing to do with their traditional activities?

Charles: Money, I would say, is not the end all and be all, but it is the means of getting what you want. I have concluded, based on I guess the most important fact, is that virtually no national university that once played big-time sports has ever given it up. There's only a handful of exceptions, and they are the exceptions that basically prove the rule. Why do these universities keep doing it year after year? The answer I come up with is a pretty simple one, is that the boards of trustees want to be competitive in sports for whatever reason it serves their interests. It's as simple as that. They want to play. They want to be involved.

Charles: Now, there are is number of explanations about what this might do for the university. It might give the university some advertising. It might attract students. But I think, when it comes down to it, the board of trustees wants to play the game.

Judith: So, from my perspective as a European, when I think about what struck me about why this is happening, so I just throw this hypothesis out there, is that American universities are greatly dependent on the generosity of their alums, and that alums, in general, would be more generous if they have this feeling of family or of belonging and that sports creates this we feeling, this culture of belonging, a sense of identity. It's crucial to shaping that identity during the years when the individual is at college so that when they leave, they think of themselves as being part of that. Is that ...?

Charles: Well, it took me a long time to understand that wisdom that you have just enunciated. I think that it is ... When you use the word family, that is part of it, and the way the alums relate to the university does come through this. One of the things, though, that struck me in writing the first edition of the book was how many non-alums have developed real devotion to institutions-

Judith: Yes.

Charles: ... especially the state flagship universities. They may never have gone to college at all, but when you cross the Oklahoma/Arkansas border, the loyalties of those individuals from one zip code to the next switch on and off like a light.

Judith: Right. So it's not just about alums. That is part of it-

Charles: That's right.

Judith: ... but there's more to it than that. How much money are we really talking about in this game?

Charles: The top universities spend and take in maybe something like \$150 million a year. You start adding that up and it turns into be real cash. Involved in then-

Judith: When you say "take in" do you mean also ... Is that also include like commercials and ...

Charles: That's just individual universities. So, Duke, I should have looked in this, but I think that the revenue it gets in is about 120 million a year. The top ones would pay maybe 150 million a year. And so that pays for coaches and things like that.

Judith: Right.

Charles: I mean, the bigger world is you have to talk about sneaker companies, and you have to talk about advertisers, and talk about networks, and the networks have had a growing influence over the universities to the extent that traditional conferences that have existed for decades have been thrown on their head in the last 15 years because they have been marching to a drummer that says, "We need to cover more media markets." So the Big 10 now has 14 teams. One that covers Washington and one that covers New York.

Judith: So universities need money, so that's a good thing, so what is the downside to having this business enterprise on campus?

Charles: Well, there are almost too many to count. You would want to start counting the downside, but I think I would first say that there are also some upsides to it.

Judith: Right.

Charles: But let me just say, would stick out most in my mind is that by engaging in this commercial enterprise, you are almost required to be dishonest in a way that may be a little bit more than just the usual kind of politeness. You're having to say to people with a straight face, "These are students," but in many cases, there's not even pretense that these will be students at your university. They-

Judith: We're talking about UNC now, not Duke, right?

Charles: Yeah, if we wanted to talk about scandals, which I do in the second edition, our beloved neighbor, University of North Carolina, has to be on that list because what they allowed to happen for 18 years is to have fake courses taken by students, many of whom were athletes. It was just a failure of kind of the most elemental oversight, but I think a lot of people would agree that it was allowed to happen because people didn't want to look too closely at it.

Judith: But, what I'm hearing you say though, is that that's just one end of an extreme on a continuum on which universities, in general, are sitting and not all have a clear conscience here. That all of the universities have some pretense that these are students and are taking them through the ...

Charles: We're using a separate set of admissions.

Judith: Right.

Charles: We're saying a person is a student when he or she, often he, in the money sports, are just here for on a temporary basis. And then, it makes the university that should stand for truthfulness, it makes it more into a commercial enterprise where you are saying things that everybody knows is not exactly right.

Judith: So, okay, so the students that are in the sports are affected by it, in that they don't get the education that they purportedly are here to get, but what about the rest of the students? Is there any kind of effect on them?

Charles: Okay, well, there are. It's a distraction. Now, I think there are pluses and minuses. The psychologists, the social psychologists would tell us that happy students are probably going to be better as students, and happier people, and to have an atmosphere of belonging, affiliation, makes American campuses really quite different from European campuses. You don't see the sweaters and the hats and just the feeling of pride in the institution in the same way.

Judith: Right.

Charles: At the same time, studies and now in recent years, these are statistical studies by my fellow economists that have shown, for example, one ... well this was in my book ... during the March Madness tournament in NCAA men's basketball tournament, that there's a drop-off in the downloading of articles in JSTOR. Also-

Judith: JSTOR being an electronic article for journal publications.

Charles: Right. A repository for articles that all of us are using, including students. So, it's right after Selection Sunday, there is a bump down, and then it recovers. Another study showed that during the tournament, there is more binge drinking. Another study showed for one university that during successful football seasons, the men especially, studied less, partied more, made lower grades. And then one especially disturbing study of campuses across the country showed that during home football games and even to some extent, away football games, there was an increase in sexual assault. None of these things is something that we welcome. It seems to come with the territory.

Judith: So, is the damage at least contained to campus, or do we have spillovers into outside of campus? I'm thinking in particular of a part of your book that talk about judges.

Charles: Oh, I'm sorry, yes. I should mention that. Occasionally, you come across an extraordinary study. This one was done by a group of economists who looked at the following relationship. They found that judges in juvenile courts in the state of Louisiana gave harsher sentences. They didn't call them sentences. They're basically ... It's the amount of time that juvenile would have to serve. They were harsher on weeks following a Louisiana State University upset loss. The harshness was even greater for African American defendant. This effect was not seen in judges that had not gone to LSU.

Judith: I'm curious whether that, in general, would also be true for a non-college sports, but I'm ... then maybe that study is not out there. Maybe it's just a sports effect overall, but you know ...

Charles: You know, there's two ways you could look at this. Number one, you can be outraged that our criminal justice system has any influence like this, but we've seen other studies-

Judith: Sure. Right.

Charles: ... in which judges being hungry even have an effect.

Judith: Right. Right.

Charles: But the other thing-

Judith: It kind of goes with judges being human?

Charles: Being human. But, I think the other thing that for me it shows is that despite the absence of sports in our mission statements and scholars like me, who ignore sports in their books, that they have a profound effect. The universities, I think, need to own it.

Judith: Right. I mean, it would be very hard to turnaround now, to take sports out of universities. There are so many fans. Can you talk a little bit about the project you did looking at people's obituaries and their connections to universities?

Charles: I found out from my dear cousin who lives in Birmingham, that it is typical for an obituary to include the Alabama Crimson Tide, and after I laughed, I said, "Well that's got to be only true of Alabama," but it turns out it is universal. So, if we pick up our Raleigh News & Observer, there is not a week that goes by that there is not some mention in an obituary of the devotion that these people have for a college. I found ... It's not ironic. The people that write these know the person and want to tell the story of who they were.

Charles: Indulge me. Let me just give you a couple of examples.

Judith: Charlie, I will always indulge you.

Charles: Here are several that I found. "She loved playing the piano and organ, completing the LA Times crossword puzzles, and passionately supporting the UCLA Bruins. Her eternal optimism extended even so far as Bruin football." Here's another obit. "He enjoyed time with his family, NASCAR, the Wolf Pack, and gardening." Another-

Judith: All on the same level.

Charles: The juxtaposition of things that you would think are sacred.

Judith: Family.

Charles: Family, with these other interests showed to me that this is a true devotion that can't just be laughed off.

Charles: One more. "He loved God, his family, the Lodge, traveling, telling jokes, singing country music, and watching the OU Sooners play football!"

Judith: And notable that it's sort of at the end. There's an exclamation point, too, of that sentence.

Charles: But what it says to me is that universities, without doing anything about it, have this tie to real people out there. No president can create it or destroy it. I guess they could destroy it, but it would be difficult. It's something that has lasted a long time. For example, University of Minnesota, and University of Wisconsin, they've played football for 162 years. That's a period that covers two world wars, the Great Depression, and something like 26 presidents. There are few things that Minnesota and Wisconsin, both of them, great land grant universities, that can say they've been there that long. And so, it's something that really is, to use the term, baked in to universities that have it. Not all universities do.

Judith: So what, in your mind, Charlie, is the biggest reform that universities need to undertake in this realm.

Charles: I would start with acknowledging that this is an important function, that it's in fact, it's a core function. Stop being ashamed of the fact that it's there. And then, once it's out there, then we can have a conversation about what part of it is consistent with our other objectives. But we have long traditions in universities about truth telling, and about honesty, and we ought to make sure that the way we operate everything conforms to those same ideals.

Judith: So, you've said in the past that we won't be able to achieve significant reform in big-time sports without first changing universities. What do you mean by that?

Charles: Well, that's the change I would say, that you have to be upfront about this. Let's be honest. Let's go look at the mission statement. Is this really all the things that we do? My guess, without knowing anything about it, is that the number of hours, if you add up the number of hours that the board of trustees talks in full session, and in an executive committee, and during coffee breaks, that the amount of time spent on athletics is much more than the percentage of words devoted to it in the mission statement, which is [crosstalk 00:18:10].

Judith: Zero. So last question. March Madness is coming, so will you be watching or will you be boycotting?

Charles: I've never boycotted. I grew up really enjoying it. One of the things about, as a social scientist you would certainly understand, is that it was expressed by a psychologist here at Duke named Irving Alexander, and he said, "We should be looking for the ever-present but unexamined." Here is a case that it takes a European really to see what is

this thing going on? Where as an American like me grows up with it and just assumes that, of course, on Saturday, there'll be 60,000 people sitting in a stadium watching some boys play. So, I have found myself losing a little interest, but I still ... I go to football games and I go to the occasional basketball game, and I try to go to other sports that Duke sponsors, because let just end by saying college athletics is a wonderful thing, and that in my view, a good liberal arts education ought to have the capacity to allow athletes to do their thing on teams or individually, and that you can learn things there that you can't learn any other way.

Charles: I can hold commercial sports to one standard, but I think that the experience that students have when there are no spectators around, that is pure education.

Judith: Charlie, thank you so much for joining me today. My guest has been Charlie Clotfelter. He's the author of Big-Time Sports in American Universities. The second edition is available now from Cambridge University Press. We'll be back in a couple of weeks with another episode of Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley.