

SPORTS IN AMERICA 2007: Facing Up to Global Realities

By Frank G. Splitt

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND – America's apparent priority of athletics over academics, particularly STEMS (Science-Technology-Engineering-Mathematics), can have negative consequences in our changing world. [1] This essay continues discussions begun in previous essays. [2, 3] But first, here's some stage-setting background:

America leaves 2007 still facing a wide array of unsettled issues surrounding: unpopular, divisive, resource-draining wars in the Middle East, a global jihad with threats posed by transnational terror networks, homeland security, overuse of foreign oil, the impact of climate change, a healthcare system short on service but long on costs, illegal immigration, neglected repairs/upgrades for aging physical and transportation infrastructure, an overstressed, if not broken, education system warped by sports culture, predicted downstream Social Security funding deficits, inner cities ravaged by criminal drug empires, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and America's growing debt, approximately half of which is held outside the United States.

Taken together, these issues represent enormous challenges of almost paralyzing complexity. The lack of resolution of these issues, along with its loss of prestige on the world stage, undermines America's position as a global military and economic superpower. Furthermore, oil has continued to climb toward \$100 a barrel, big financial companies are now taking multibillion-dollar write-offs linked to the credit-market turmoil, and the Federal Reserve is warning that the nation's economic growth is likely to slow. Making matters worse, loan defaults on adjustable-rate sub-prime mortgages, occasioned by an economic downturn, would aggravate an already bleak mortgage-industry situation, and conceivably provide the tipping point for sending the economy into a tailspin akin to the depression years of the 1930s.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND BUSINESS INSTITUTIONS – So what are the forces at work in America's higher education and business institutions? Putting the issue of college sports aside for the moment, it is to be noted that for many years an increasing number of America's front-line colleges and universities have been working to enhance Far and Middle Eastern higher education. Engineering education is no exception. It is difficult to see how, in the long run, America's own schools can provide a proportional advantage to its engineering graduates that offset substantial wage differentials and so arrest off-shoring of engineering functions. [4]

U.S. companies are working to survive in our changing world. Motorola provides an instructive example with its early November 2007, announcement of the opening of its new Beijing R&D complex housing 3,000 employees including 2,000 engineers. It is representative as well. Ten days after the Motorola announcement, AP reported that technology outsourcing is becoming big business in China's northern port city of Dalian. German software giant SAP AG now brings its toughest jobs to Dalian. Along with SAP,

Hewlett-Packard Co., IBM Corp., Britain's BT Group PLC, Japan's Yokogawa Electric Corp. and some 230 other foreign companies have flocked to Dalian in the last decade.

The AP story went on to say "a critical mass of development is coming. Ground broke this year for both a \$2.5 billion Intel Corp. factory and a \$6.5 billion nuclear power plant for the city. Cranes line the busy waterfront as office and apartment towers rise at a furious pace." Not to worry! America is doing its own thing in the way of furious building.

INVESTING IN ATHLETIC INFRASTRUCTURE – One need only look at big-time (NCAA Div IA) college and university campuses where the building and expansion of football stadiums, basketball arenas, and other athletic facilities reflects the extant values and priorities at these institutions of higher education.

This building frenzy is not only symptomatic of the American public's sports culture, but also of the strong influence of wealthy and/or politically connected boosters, many of whom sit on big-time school governing boards. Stadium expansions across the U.S. – aided and abetted by state and federal policies – are contributing to the ongoing deterioration of America's education infrastructure while the college sports entertainment business grows unabated.

PUBLIC APATHY – In the meantime, it seems that the American public is still quite content with not really knowing what's going on so long as it is being entertained – not recognizing that STEMS literacy will be essential in meeting the unsettled issues and challenges we face as a society. Apparently the public does not care that, while we as a nation desperately need a more STEMS literate electorate and STEMS literate leadership, the most important products from many of its big-time colleges and universities are professional football and men's basketball players. These players represent the output of alternative educational systems engineered at Academic Support (Eligibility) Centers that are absolute marvels of ingenuity, innovation, deceit, and deception.

If the truth be told, the warping of educational missions and priorities at U.S. colleges and universities supporting Div IA men's football and basketball programs have made America the laughingstock of our global competitors. These competitors are focused on building – ironically with help from U.S. educators – educational systems that produce graduates that will enable them to compete against the U.S. in our changing world, rather than in sky-boxed stadiums and well appointed basketball arenas.

For example, in China, which educates approximately one-half of the world's engineers, engineering education is valued as a preparation for contributions in government, policy, innovation, intellectual property, broad engineering disciplines, and manufacturing. STEMS study is considered to be a patriotic duty — providing a robust pipeline of human resources for R&D.

It is of interest to note that a 2006 National Science Foundation survey found that 25% of Americans did not know the earth goes around the sun. America's public apathy may very well reflect the fact that most Americans are scientifically illiterate.

STEMS GAP – Recently, the media reported a new study demonstrating that students in Asian countries, who are likely to be our chief economic competitors in the 21st century, significantly outperform all U.S. students – pointing to a potential 'STEMS gap' and a corresponding need to guide both the public and Congress to address the problems that have produced this gap as well as the serious consequences the gap may engender.

Lawrence Krauss, professor of physics and astronomy at Case Western Reserve University and chair of the Physics Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, describes the need for STEMS related education this way:

America's current economic strength derives from the investments in fundamental research and technology made a generation ago. Future strength will depend upon research being done today. One might argue that many key discoveries occurred as a result of importing scientific talent. But as foreign educational systems and economies flourish, our ability to attract and keep new talent could easily erode. Even with a continued foreign influx of scientific talent, it would be foolish to expect that we can maintain our technological leadership without a solid domestic workforce as well. Almost all of the major challenges we will face as a nation in this new century, from the environment, national security and economic competitiveness to energy strategies, have a scientific or technological basis. [5]

NEED TO OVERCOME IMPEDIMENTS –If America is to do well in the 21st Century's globalization game, then it needs to get its priorities right, especially at our universities and government institutions. However, according to Henry Kissinger, the entire government system "is now much more driven by short-term political calculations, the need to keep powerful and vocal constituencies happy, and an eye on the next election." [6] This presents difficult political circumstances that can impede progress on corrective-action initiatives, such as reclaiming academic primacy in higher education by requiring appropriate levels of transparency, accountability, and oversight of the NCAA and its member institutions.

On a more positive note, Krauss reports that a group of scientists, journalists and business people held a "science summit" this past summer to discuss ways to build a growing awareness of the importance of scientific issues in government – convening a working group to explore ways that the scientific and business communities might work together to ensure that science becomes an issue in the 2008 campaign. [7]

CONCLUDING REMARKS – Today, America has the most to lose as it confronts new global realities with its STEMS gap and its institutional priority of athletics over academics – all the while handicapped by the public's continued obsession with sports entertainment. America's present-day position does not present a pretty picture.

Perhaps the mass realization by America's citizenry, liberal and conservative alike, that, as a whole, it shares responsibility for the resolution of America's problems. This realization could be of inestimable value in drawing together America's presently

fragmented-and-apart citizenry – after all, these citizens will all share in creating our common future.

If America keeps doing what it has always done, it's going to get what it always got and is still getting. Obviously, we need to do things differently. A good place to start would be with our national media. A transformation from a seeming obsession with what 'sells' - sex, violence, scandals, and sports – to presentation of more detailed coverage of issues that threaten the future physical and economic well being of America would be a good first step. As for politics, the election of candidates that have a firm grasp of the issues and coherent plans for the future could very well be a consequence of media enhanced voter awareness and enlightenment.

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NOTES

1. This essay is based on the author's, letter, “Universities must address priorities,” *Daily Herald*, Nov. 26, 2007.
2. Splitt, Frank G., “SPORTS IN AMERICA 2005: Facing Up to Global Realities,” http://thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Sports_in_America.pdf
3. _____, “ARE BIG-TIME COLLEGE SPORTS GOOD FOR AMERICA?” http://www.thedrakegroup.org/Splitt_Good_for_America.pdf
4. In the face of rapid globalization, efforts to focus America's engineering schools on innovation and entrepreneurship, though a worthwhile goal, will likely provide a short-term fix at best. Information technology has already changed the way business is done worldwide and will keep on changing it -- smoothing out differentials along the way.
5. Krauss, Lawrence M., “Science and the Candidates,” *The Wall Street Journal*, p. A18, December 6, 2007.
6. Professor Krauss is also part of ScienceDebate2008 that issued a public call for a U.S. presidential debate devoted to science and technology – covering three broad categories: the environment, health and medicine, and science and technology policy.
7. Rivkin, David B., "Diplomacy in the Post-9/11 Era," *The Wall Street Journal*, OPINION, p. A11, Nov. 17-18, 2007.