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## Focus on academics

### Everything, including moving to 1-A, is secondary to our primary mission

*Sunday, October 1, 2006 1:19 AM CDT*

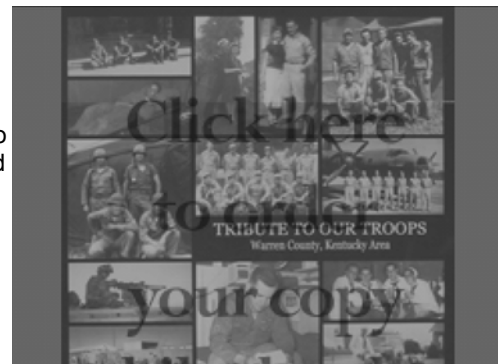
Professional and intercollegiate sports long have been a cultural and economic part of American life. In no other country in the world at the postsecondary education level do sports play such a prominent, visual and often controversial role. Stories abound of corruption, influence-peddling, rules violations, cheating and exploitation in the world of intercollegiate sports. Conversely, there are few stories about successful student-athletes, program graduation rates or the types of lifelong learning that are, or should be, more meaningful to student-athletes than simply winning a game. Although there is no doubt that intercollegiate sports can be a powerful symbol of institutional pride and can give a university some measure of prominence regionally and nationally that it might not otherwise achieve, there is more myth and perception about the intrinsic academic, cultural and economic value of sports to universities than verifiable empirical evidence.

Moving an institution from I-AA to I-A competition presents both opportunities and challenges. Is there a meaningful and verifiable relationship between Western Kentucky University's ambition to become a leading American university with international reach and its desire to be in the company of I-A institutions? How far does the perception of "you are known by the company you keep" go in shaping the traditions, values and goals of a university? After all, the likes of Yale, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Colgate and Delaware play I-AA and these have pretty good academic reputations! Would the institution rather be known for the company it keeps in producing Fulbright scholars, well-educated students for the benefit of our society, award-winning debate teams and globally prepared and competitive graduates, or the fact that it competes in a I-A sports environment? These are not mutually exclusive, of course, but it seems that, for the future of our communities and the institution, a greater focus on the former rather than the latter is in our best long-term interests.

There are costs involved in switching to I-A competition. It might be visually and perceptually rewarding to be driving a Rolls Royce on the road with all the other Rolls Royces, but what if your brakes don't work, the lights have burned out, the engine burns oil and the tires are worn? Will you get to where you need to go? As Western



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undergoes a very significant physical and academic transformation, there are critical elements involved in our primary mission - the education of all of our students - that seem to have been overlooked or not valued as much as they should in the debate about a transition to I-A.

Why is Western promoting a \$75 per semester increase in tuition rates to fund I-A athletics when it seems fundamentally incapable of making any meaningful progress in solving some of its most pressing funding challenges related to academic quality? Thousands of our students each semester are taught by hard-working, dedicated adjuncts who are paid an embarrassingly low stipend. The institution has made a big deal of the 2 percent or 3 percent raises in part-time stipends over the past few years, but it has failed miserably over the past decade to demonstrate that it is committed to paying fair and competitive wages for such important instruction. Inadequate or no office space, poor access to communication facilities and other challenges continue to plague our adjunct faculty ranks, despite the pronouncements of the institution that it "cares" about their conditions. Apparently it doesn't care as much about these conditions to solve them as it does about funding I-A athletics!

Faculty remain significantly below the benchmark salaries of those institutions we now desire to compete against athletically, despite the best efforts of the board and the president to make improvements in this area. Will becoming a I-A institution likely move us from just below the median for existing benchmarks to a benchmark position that would be intolerably low for faculty and staff? Are there existing data to explicate this likely scenario? There are also significant environmental challenges ahead of us, such as poor air quality in many buildings, outmoded teaching and learning facilities, and inadequate support for a new type of educational model for the 21st century. Library resources are stretched thin as academic departments have been asked again to cut another 10 percent from their research journals budget. Can Western be a leading American university with international reach without providing a meaningful level of support for academic books and journals - materials that are fundamental and crucial to building academic quality?

As an institution, we have committed to preparing each of our students for success in a global society. Western trumpets internationalization and study abroad as key elements in this process, yet it still pays the equivalent of half the minimum hourly wage for study abroad teaching stipends and has been unwilling in the past to institute a modest "internationalization" fee that would benefit all students. There appears to be no such crisis of conscience concerning an additional \$75 per semester athletic fee for all students that will directly benefit a mere 300 or so student athletes. Increased national recognition through I-A competition may well provide more prominence for Western, but we've seen no evidence of prominence or perception actually increasing stipends or paying the basic living costs of faculty, staff and students! Prominence does not pay the bills directly - cash does! It's hard to believe that the institution will be as committed to academic quality over the coming decade, as professed by the president, as it seems to be committed to I-A athletics, given its recent history related to both the rhetoric and actual funding for critical academic needs. Again, actions speak louder than words when it comes to improving academic quality.

As a Western faculty member, and someone who promotes the institution nationally



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and globally, I am not fundamentally opposed to I-A competition or to intercollegiate athletics generally. There is significant cultural and social value that emanates from the incorporation of athletics, intramural sports activities, community activism and other activities into university life. All have their intrinsic value and place in the academic community. I am fundamentally opposed, however, to funding an experiment (and it most certainly is an experiment) that likely will limit the positive developments under way in improving academic quality and other academic initiatives without clearly stated rationales, budgets and goals. I am suspicious of a proposal that does not explicitly, honestly and openly provide clear budgetary goals and statements linked to academic quality, or that does not demonstrate unequivocally how the institution intends to fund I-A athletics while concomitantly meeting its stated academic quality goals. I am suspicious of a proposal that does not provide unambiguous long-term plans to fund adequately and effectively the needs of the academic community at Western. For too many years at Western, the budgeting process has been antediluvian, overly political and inadequate to support the long-term academic goals of the institution. Any discussion of a transition to I-A competition should and must incorporate an open, honest and transparent budget strategy that sends a clear and unambiguous message to faculty, students and our communities - academics is our primary institutional mission! Everything else is valuable, and useful, but secondary to that mission.

*- David J. Keeling is a professor of geography and is head of Geography and Geology Department at Western Kentucky University. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not of the department.*

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