Place Health above Revenue by Cancelling the 2020 College Football Season

August 11, 2020

Richard Cherwitz

Most of my op-eds are usually about politics. As a communication scholar I have tried to use my academic expertise to understand political messages. This commentary, however, is about sports—a subject for which I have passion but claim no unique expertise.

Since attending the University of Iowa (1970-1978) I have been an enthusiastic fan of college athletics. After receiving my PhD I became a professor at the University of Texas at Austin (1978-2019). For three years I served as a faculty representative on the UT Men’s Athletics Council—a group overseeing the operation of the Athletics department. During that period my appreciation of student athletes, administration and coaches grew substantially. I realized that athletics requires a delicate balance between the business side of sports and the wellbeing of students.
Let me be clear: I enjoy watching football games on Saturday, especially my Texas Longhorns, and sometimes this is my favorite day of the week. Hence, at the risk of alienating football enthusiasts, businesses which profit from home football games and UT alumni, I believe more colleges and universities should follow the lead of the University of Connecticut which became the first major university on Wednesday to cancel the 2020 season. If nothing else the season should be delayed until it is safe.

Bravo to the University of Connecticut! Our current COVID-19 environment demands we place health above entertainment and revenue—and that’s at least partially what motivated Connecticut’s decision. Anything less would have been an exercise in self-delusion and greed. Why?

Consider the facts:

- After announcing a ten-game schedule, the South East Conference (SEC) notified football players that COVID-19 cases “on every single team” are inevitable. An SEC spokesperson declared: “There are going to be outbreaks. We're going to have positive cases on every single team in the SEC. That's a given. And we can't prevent it.”

- My own institution, UT, already has a significant number of Covid-19 cases on campus. While other institutions have failed to report their data, no doubt they too have many cases. It is hard to imagine that returning athletes at UT or elsewhere will be safe.

- College football is perhaps the sport with the most contact. Blocking and tackling, which has its own routine risks, becomes
even more dangerous during a pandemic when masks are not part of athletes' official equipment.

- National Football League (NFL) pre-season training camps already are giving us a glimpse of how bad the spread of COVID-19 could be with college football. According to ESPN, roughly ten NFL teams have had at least one player test positive for the coronavirus. There’s an understanding, league-wide, that a large number of NFL players and staffers are bound to catch the virus, simply due to how easily it spreads.

- Scheduled Major League Baseball games are being cancelled as COVID-19 outbreaks are occurring. The most recent example is the Miami Marlins where the coronavirus is rampant. And keep in mind that baseball is far less a contact sport than football.

- With each day we are witnessing more college football players declaring they will opt out of the 2020 season in order to protect their health. Over 1,000 Big-Ten football players have expressed outrage regarding a lack of safety protocols. Can we even imagine what safety protocols would protect the health of players?

- A day after the University of Connecticut announced it was canceling its 2020 season, the Drake Group, a national organization of faculty and others whose mission is to defend educational integrity in higher education from the corrosive aspects of commercialized college sports, called on college football coaches and athletic directors around the country to cancel their upcoming seasons. The Drake Group declared that college athletes' health, safety, and well-being during this
pandemic are far more important than the ongoing educational and economic exploitation of college athletes.

For these and other reasons I hope UT and others Texas schools will have the courage and common sense to re-think their decision to schedule football games this season. At minimum perhaps the season should wait until the spring—just as Minnesota high schools wisely chose to do. Taking this bold action will illustrate true leadership and moral fortitude. Isn’t that the lesson we wish students to learn?

RICHARD CHERWITZ, Ph.D., is the Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial professor emeritus in the Moody College of Communication and founding director of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium at the University of Texas at Austin.