Cherwitz: In college athletics, fans are in last place

UT's doubling of season ticket prices for faculty, staff shows profit motive has taken top priority

By Richard Cherwitz | July 7, 2015

Photo: Chris Covatta, Stringer
AUSTIN, TX - SEPTEMBER 6: Head coach Charlie Strong of the Texas Longhorns encourages his team in warmups before playing the BYU Cougars on September 6, 2014 at Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium in Austin, Texas. (Photo by Chris Covatta/Getty Images)

Perhaps unlike many in the community, I am late to the party - arguably even a little naive. Since my time as a member of the University of Texas at Austin Intercollegiate Athletics Council for Men (1999-2003), I was convinced that college athletics, while not without difficult challenges and problems, overall and in most cases was doing a relatively good job to navigate a complex terrain, balancing the seemingly contradictory priorities of academics, sports and business.

In the past year, though, I have become increasingly disillusioned.

Although I truly love attending the games, cheering for my Longhorns and watching my students compete, the concept of "intercollegiate athletics" has become a misnomer.

Admittedly, college athletics is at least in part a business. I accept this and understand that coaches must win games and tickets must be sold to subsidize the enterprise. Nobody can doubt this.

A slap in the face of faculty, staff

The final straw for me was when UT Athletic Director Steve Patterson more than doubled the price of faculty and staff season football and basketball tickets, as well as placed a greater financial burden on small donors wishing to purchase tickets.

I cannot speak to what may be the legitimate concerns and response of donors. However, I know that most of my faculty and staff colleagues with whom I have talked opted not to renew their season tickets. It now was clear to us that the Athletics Department no longer
considers faculty and staff to be members of the "family" and "community" - the very people who educate and serve student athletes. Instead, we became another one of the institution's many "corporate customers."

No amount of Longhorn Nation and Burnt Orange patriotic language appealing to support of team and school can sugar-coat or camouflage the larger problems facing college athletics, of which the new ticket price structure is a symptom.

To be clear, this is more than a matter of faculty/staff and donor discontent about the price of attending games. Ticket prices are the tip of the iceberg: College athletics at UT - and elsewhere - now is almost exclusively about making money, and a lot of it. Like an arms race, a metaphor aptly used by many to describe the situation, the problem escalates with no end in sight.

To be fair, athletic administrators say they care about and give lip service to the education of student athletes. More in fact is being done to improve the academic performance of athletes and increase graduation rates. In addition, steps are being taken to make sure athletes are responsible citizens off the court and following graduation.

Academics takes a back seat

Nevertheless, the reality is that academic matters will always - perhaps inherently - take a back seat as long as the business mentality dominates the thinking and actions of athletic departments. Why would we expect otherwise? As one of my colleagues suggested, the
situation is so troubling that "University of" should be removed from "Texas Longhorns."

I wish I could do more than express indignation and outrage, yearning for what was - or at least seemed to be-better times. Unfortunately, the problem appears totally out of control; there is no obvious quick fix.

No institution, including UT, is likely to act unilaterally, taking the first step and risking the possibility of losing games or not filling the stands in order to give academics a higher priority in the intercollegiate athletics equation.

While this is the first time in 36 years at UT that I have not purchased season tickets, I hope the day never comes when, because of all of the problems facing intercollegiate athletics, even being a fan becomes challenging.

Cherwitz is a professor in the Moody College of Communication and faculty fellow in the Division of Diversity & Community Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin.