

A Rhetorical Call to Address Racism in College Athletics

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June 20, 2020



One of the most blatant yet least discussed examples of our country's culture of racism is college athletics. In many ways, however, the treatment of student-athletes is emblematic of the need to adopt measures in all areas of life, including economic, legal, politics, etc., to reverse the pattern of discrimination and promote genuine equality.

At my alma mater, University of Iowa football players returned to campus to prepare for voluntary workouts amid an uproar. Former players over the past week alleged systemic racism and other mistreatment in the program. The team's strength coach, Chris Doyle, has been placed on administrative leave and coach Kirk Ferentz's leadership was called into question by some.

About two dozen current players took to social media to voice messages of unity. None complained directly about his treatment. The strongest statement came from sophomore defensive back Kaevon Merriweather, saying that he and the team do not need the support of

people who do not support what many on the team are speaking out against.

Specifically, Merriweather declared that, if fans don't support the team taking a knee during the playing of The National Anthem they shouldn't support the team or even watch their games on television. "If you think you could possibly call yourself an Iowa football fan and you cannot agree with what I said and what this team is standing on, then stop calling yourself a fan immediately because I can promise you we do not care," he noted.

It should come as no surprise that last week at my own institution, The University of Texas at Austin (UT), one with a long and well-documented history of racism, student-athletes rose up and sent a clear message to the administration. They "demanded" that major changes be implemented to ameliorate the problem of racism on campus.

Having been a professor at UT for 42 years, taught more student-athletes than I can count, served as a faculty member on the Men's Athletics Council for several years and been a proud Longhorn fan, I was delighted to learn that UT student-athletes wrote such a thoughtful letter articulating what should be done to address the problem of racism.

The UT student-athletes' message was poignant, carefully crafted and persuasively stated. Best of all, it resonated with the highest ideals of academic institutions—to logically question ideas, deliberate, openly engage in debate and reach informed choices. In short, the letter was far more than an unreasoned demand. As a communication scholar who spent his career helping students learn how to construct cogent and effective arguments, I found the tone and content of the message impressive and rhetorically powerful.

Above all else, I was heartened to witness student-athletes standing up and voicing their concerns about an historic problem on campus—one that became clearer, as well as more compelling and real, following George Floyd’s death and subsequent protests throughout the country. I look forward to seeing how UT’s administration responds, and hope they will work with students to adopt significant changes. After all, the UT motto is: “What Starts Here Changes the World.”

Beyond Texas and Iowa, I hope all colleges and universities will face this issue honestly, demonstrating a willingness to help rectify the culture of racism that has plagued us for years.

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