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Let's Keep Athletes Safe in College Football

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

Since attending the University of Iowa (1970-1978), I have been an enthusiastic fan of college athletics. After receiving my Ph.D. 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 sports and the wellbeing of students.

Let me be clear: I enjoy watching football games on Saturday, especially my Texas Longhorns and Iowa Hawkeyes, and sometimes this is my favorite day of the week. Hence, at the risk of alienating football enthusiasts and college 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 till it's *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 in part what motivated Connecticut's decision. Anything less would have been an exercise in self-delusion and greed. Why?

Consider the facts:

- After announcing a 10-game schedule, the South East Conference 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, the University of Texas, is listed as the number one university in the United States with the most number of COVID-19 cases on campus. It’s hard to imagine that returning athletes 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 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 10 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. More than 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?

For these and other reasons I hope college and university presidents and athletics administration will have the courage and common sense to rethink their decision to schedule football games this season. At minimum perhaps the season should wait till spring — just as Minnesota high schools wisely chose to do. Taking this bold action will illustrate true leadership and moral fortitude. Isn't that ultimately the lesson we wish college students to learn?

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