

Remarks of John J. DeGioia  
President Georgetown University  
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Thank you all for being here this morning. It is truly a privilege to have this opportunity to address a group of women and men who serve at such a critical intersection between several important facets of campus life.

I am particularly pleased to see Georgetown's own Faculty Athletics Representative, Dr. Wayne Knoll, here with us this morning. I can personally attest to Dr. Knoll's long history of engagement with the Georgetown campus – as an undergraduate student and a graduate student at Georgetown, I was fortunate enough to have him as an instructor twice, including a capstone experience in my senior year when he taught me a tutorial on Faulkner. We at Georgetown are honored by his service, and are truly grateful to have his leadership on these critical issues.

It is in reflecting on Dr. Knoll's work that I am reminded of a fundamental reality of the position of Faculty Athletics Representative – that just as the character of each of your schools are unique and distinctive, your roles on campus and the relationships that you cultivate vary greatly from school to school.

Those of you from larger colleges and universities, with a larger faculty and a broader and more diverse range of departments and schools, are certainly faced with different challenges than a Representative who hails from a smaller school. And you all come from athletic programs with different emphases on different sports.

Because of the diversity of the schools you represent, as well as the varying roles that many of the women and men in this room play, I feel it would be most valuable this morning to discuss generally the challenges that our institutions face, the tensions that exist, and the engagement that can help ensure that this tension is a creative, innovative, positive force at our colleges and universities.

My comments this morning will be organized around three themes: (1) the mission and purpose of our colleges and universities and two competing logics that are always present in our communities; (2) insights that can be illuminated as a result of these framing logics; (3) and the urgency of your engagement in the tensions and conflicts that emerge on our campuses in the context of the place of intercollegiate athletics in our communities.

First, I'd like to propose a somewhat provocative way of framing the issues. The challenges that we face can best be understood by looking at what drives us, as members of institutions of higher education. What is our mission, our purpose, and how do our priorities reflect the pursuit of human excellence?

At the heart of our universities' mission, is the pursuit of human excellence. The work of our schools can be captured by identifying two distinct "logics of excellence." I would like to

examine these two at times competing and compelling, conflicting and contrasting, at times complimentary understandings of what constitutes human excellence. I believe both are always present and are particularly acute as we seek to find the appropriate balance within.

The first holds that human excellence is best understood as a balance, an integration, among the various dimensions of our humanity. This is a view of excellence first mapped out by Aristotle. There are many dimensions that constitute a human life. We have intellect and can reason; we are capable of artistic expression; we can communicate between and among one another; we feel emotions – we can love and care for one another; we have religious experiences and sensibilities; we are social and political beings; we are capable of enjoying ourselves; we can make moral judgments. The full inventory, blended together, characterizes what it means to be human.

From this perspective, human excellence is understood as the ability to find the proper balance – a harmony within and among these many dimensions. When we achieve this harmony, we flourish as human beings.

The second understanding of human excellence is very different. It holds that human excellence is best demonstrated in boundary-breaking achievements. This is the understanding that finds many of its roots in the philosopher Nietzsche.

Under this logic, excellence means performing feats that others can't even imagine; forging beyond the limits of previous accomplishment; pushing back the "frontiers;" going where others have not yet gone. Typically, this form of excellence requires that one sacrifice "well roundedness" and harmony to the focused, unyielding pursuit of truly unprecedented discovery or performance.

I believe this framework of these two distinctive logics of excellence provide a helpful way of framing some of the challenges we face in our efforts to find the appropriate balance for intercollegiate athletics within the context of the mission and purpose for our colleges and universities. What does this way of framing the nature of our work illuminate about the place of intercollegiate athletics? Three comments.

First, let me offer a few words under a category that we often refer to as the "arms race" in intercollegiate athletics. I wish to do so by reminding you of a story of a runner striving to achieve at the highest possible level.

A runner striving to be the fastest – striving to that "limit experience" – isn't just competing with himself – he is competing with other runners, other individuals who are determined to achieve that same Nietzschean ideal of human excellence. And as we as universities promote and pursue that ideal of human excellence, we also push each other to compete at newer and higher levels.

I'd like you to recall a few scenes from the 1981 film, "Chariots of Fire." These scenes capture the unprecedented move of a young British sprinter, Harold Abrahams, to engage a "professional" coach, Sam Mussabini, to help him prepare for the 1924 Olympic Games.

When Harold Abrahams makes a decision to employ a professional coach, the logic he's using places him beyond the realm of accepted practice. Why has he done so? To maximize his performance. To set a new standard. The move to engage a professional coach logically places both Abrahams and his competitors into a domain in which their questions, choices, decisions and actions are on a different level...it escalates the competition.

Now apply this logic to collegiate athletics. Among the 1281 NCAA colleges and universities in the United States, 119 are Division 1A football schools, which includes the 64 BCS schools. Once a school makes a choice to hire a fulltime head coach...or fulltime assistants...or pay a coach an annual salary of \$2 million ... or when one school builds a new indoor practice facility and this becomes the established expectation in a conference... it makes it very difficult for others to compete unless they follow that logic.

What we call our "arms race" has its origin in a logic that is very deep in our institutions.

My second point. If we reflect on our own lives, we place great value on teachers and faculty whose extraordinary demands enabled us to see parts of ourselves, talents that were hidden, that without those demands, we would never have seen. Indeed, look at the culture of research embodied by the faculty of our universities. One of my colleagues at Georgetown spent some ten years writing a definitive study of the work of the philosopher Heidegger. Another spend years and traveled the globe to write a book about how a single t-shirt was made.

American research universities are explicit in providing support for faculty to engage in these limit experiences. We want our faculty working at the outer boundaries of current understanding. We define our missions with terms like "at the forefront of knowledge," or "pushing back the frontiers of knowledge." We seek to create communities that will encourage, reward, promote, and sustain scholars and researchers who venture out into this terrain. Sometimes we're criticized for this commitment. Outside of the academy, our faculty's work can look rarefied, unusual, overly specialized, and out of the mainstream. We defend that, because people who are pushing boundaries need space and time and freedom within which to create.

My point is this: the tension between an Aristotelian logic and Nietzschean logic is deep within the nature of our institutions. It is not just an aspect of our engagement in athletics. Throughout our society, we live this tension between the logic of balance – the logic of integration and synthesis – and the logic of the singular distinction. A fundamental commitment of the university is to support and sustain people in the living of this tension. In this way, intercollegiate athletics reflects a driving characteristic of the university.

Embedded in these comments is my third point. Universities provide an extraordinary context for the living of these two logics. We can all identify colleagues who may be living at an extreme – one whose research is a bit out there – and those who embody the grace and beauty of an integrated and harmonious life. Each of us may be able to identify moments in our own lives where we have pushed ourselves to the limit, and other times when we have felt the serenity of self-possession.

This is what makes intercollegiate athletics more challenging. We live the tension here between the two competing logics more than perhaps any other place in the university. Every athlete is engaged in a “limit experience” – pushing themselves to the very boundaries of what is possible. Yet they are always, first and foremost, our students, and the very act of pursuing an undergraduate education, with all of its dimensions – general education and core requirements, a major, residence life, community service – is an effort to foster an integration, a balance, a harmony. The term “student athlete” captures this inherent tension.

If we accept that among the challenges we face is that of balancing these competing “logics of excellence,” what do we do? My hope is that by characterizing the challenge this way, it looks more familiar. It is less about coping with the power of the logic of the market, perhaps the logic of the entertainment industry, and more in alignment with challenges we have all faced, and are in the “sweet spot” of our competency and capacity. This is work that properly belongs with the faculty. At times it may look unfamiliar and aberrant within a university community, but when we reframe it in the manner that I have described... this is work we know how to address. Every faculty member has the experience themselves, and of working with colleagues, of pursuing the limit experience and of coming back and seeking to integrate that experience into a balanced, harmonious life. Every faculty member, working with undergraduates, copes with multiple competitors for the attention of our students. Every faculty member is familiar with the challenge of supporting a young person as they seek to appropriate into their own imaginations, into their own beings, new insights that challenge them to their very core. This is powerful work. This is the work that takes place in your classrooms every day.

Intercollegiate athletics may make more demands on us as we seek to ensure a proper balance than anything else in the academy. And now, let me be clear when I use the word “balance” – in two contexts – balance within the lives of our students, and balance within the lives of our institutions and priorities. If, as I am suggesting, the most powerful means we have to ensure this balance is the engagement of our faculty, we need to understand the blocks to deeper engagement. I imagine you are all familiar with the work of the Knight Commission, on which I am deeply honored to serve. Just last month the Commission presented an exhaustive analysis of faculty perceptions. I won’t repeat the findings here now, but suffice it to say that there are important signs that emerge from this study that indicate that many faculty are disaffected and don’t see how they can make a difference in penetrating the logic that drives intercollegiate athletics, particularly in the sports of football and men’s basketball. The logic is not one they find that resonates within the ethos of a university – it is a logic more properly at home in the entertainment industry. An encouraging note, those more engaged in athletics governance on our campuses “are more positive about all aspects of intercollegiate athletics than those who are not involved.”

I don’t wish to romanticize the challenges we face. The urgency to engage and to seek the proper balance, both in the lives of our students and in our institutions, is great. But I believe it involves a kind of work that is familiar to us. I don’t wish to suggest that there is an easy fit within our communities for intercollegiate athletics. Things very easily can become disproportionate. At the same time, our colleges and universities provide a context for important carriers of culture in our society. Think about the common life in our nation during the last weeks of December and the early days of January, or the way our country is riveted in the month

of March. I am still struck by the fact that last April, 92,000 people went to watch an intra-squad football scrimmage in Tuscaloosa.

We provide a context for important work.

A context in which students can pursue the limits of their talents and abilities, both in the classroom and in our pools, on our fields, courts, and tracks. A context in which they can integrate this experience into a balanced, harmonious life.

A context that brings together our communities for moments of transcendence and joy.

A context that provides a foundation for strengthening our identities, by deepening our membership, our affiliation in our communities.

But it all comes with a set of tensions, rooted in two competing and contrasting “logics.” None of this works if we can’t engage these tensions and secure the most appropriate balance so that we can sustain the integrity of our identities as colleges and universities. The real work of securing that balance is the work of our faculties, in the classroom, in governance, and in direct involvement – in the manner best embodied by all of you here in this room.