

Good morning,

Thanks,

I readily admit that I am somewhat intimidated to speak with this athletic group about anything related to athletics. I competed in high school sports. Since that time, my athletic exploits can best be described as participatory, rather than competitive – consisting primarily of thousands and thousands of running miles logged at a pace which is best described as “plodding” and playing countless rounds of golf consisting more of searching for lost balls than sinking birdie putts.

But that, on the other hand, is exactly the point. My own high school athletic experience was not nearly as much about basketball skills as it was about preparing for life. Consider, for example, what those rounds of golf during high school taught me about the importance of doing the right thing especially when no one is watching – integrity.

Or consider what I learned when my high school basketball coach told me that I really needed to show up and practice hard on the track during spring if I was to have any hope what so ever of earning significant playing time on the varsity basketball team the next season . That not so gentle nudge led me to a rewarding lifetime of running – even if it did not lead to the amount of playing time I wanted or thought I deserved on the basketball court. The things I learned on the track that spring, however, served me so well throughout college and law school – perseverance, pacing yourself, working through pain. During all of the years following the spring of 1965, I have not won or even placed in the competitive division of any one of the scores of marathons I have run – but I can say with confidence that I would have not persevered to complete college or worked through the pain in law school or had the opportunity to live out my dream as a college president without high school athletics.

So, from my point of view concerning high school athletics, the high importance of your work is found primarily in the life lessons you teach your student athletes. You have a unique opportunity and corresponding responsibility to use your bully pulpit to raise the expectations of these young people about a life time of education and to communicate clearly to them what is necessary to be successful in the educational process.

In saying this, I do recognize that this is in many ways a particularly difficult time to talk with student athletes about college. While you are talking with them about the importance of college, they are simultaneously hearing news stories about soaring tuition costs and Starbucks baristas with masters degrees carrying massive loads of student debt. These students care deeply about their future and they are justifiably concerned with their decision to attend college or not. Is it worth it?

What conclusion should these students reach during difficult economic times when the share of the cost of their education, which must be paid by the students and their families, is rising and the share funding by the state is declining. In other words, not only is the cost going up, but the share of the increased cost which their families must bear is on the rise.

The state of Georgia is no exception. At the time my career in higher education began at the University of Georgia in 1989, we talked about the 75%/25% rule – i.e., state dollars then paid about 75% of the cost of college while tuition and fees paid the other 25%. Now, it is closer to 50/50. In other words, the cost of higher education is being methodically shifted to the students.

The resulting national debate about the cost and value of higher education, naturally creates a great deal of stress for students and their families. They are forced to balance this remaining cost and debt against the fact that a dramatically rising number of jobs require a post high school credential as the minimum qualification. By 2020, experts tell us that our new knowledge economy will require the college degree as the minimum qualification for over 60% of all jobs.

The state of Georgia has made preparation for the “new normal” one of its top priorities. Governor Nathan Deal’s “Complete College Georgia” initiative makes an increase of college degrees 250,000 by 2025 one of his top priorities.

This quandary is further complicated by the mixed messages we are sending to our students about our priorities. As a society we are spending over \$30,000 to incarcerate inmates in state prisons; and we are giving up about \$10,000 per year in lost tax revenue for each unemployed person; and yet we are spending only around \$6,000 per year in Georgia per student to provide higher education to our most treasured resources.

So why wouldn’t a student athlete be confused? Go to college and face rising costs and debts or choose not to attend find yourself unprepared for the opportunities of the new knowledge economy.

This question brings me to the central point of this brief reflection. These students need straight talk from you as they face this important decision. It is very important that you send a clear message to your student athletes that you expect them to pursue a post-secondary education - whether it is a technical college, a state college, or a selective university, and that you believe that they can and will succeed.

Now, here are my thoughts about how you can talk with these promising young people about this important life decision.

Message #1: Knowledge gives them power to control their future and college is the vehicle that provides them with the knowledge. Knowledge in our society is exploding. Those who have it will control their lives, those without it will have limited choices. Knowledge is now almost doubling every year. Look in the changes in our society since I graduated from high school in 1968. If the pizza delivery guy knocked on my door in 1970 and is now about to be replaced by a drone, what other more important changes will take place in the modern work places of these students? How much more important will this make the learning of the problem solving skills that college provides.

Message #2: A high income career as a professional athlete is not likely a realistic plan. As I talk to high school students around the state, one of our admissions recruiter officers joins me. His promising career as a professional golfer was cut short when he was shot multiple times while attempting to prevent a

mugging. He tells students how thankful he is to have earned a college degree shortly before his shortened professional golf career began. That degree earned him a job at East Georgia State College which would not have been available had he relied solely on his once abundant physical skills.

Message #3: A college degree dramatically increases your lifetime earning potential. A person with a bachelor's degree makes on average over one million dollars more over the course of their lifetime than a high school graduate; the gap is widening each year; and the chance of being unemployed is much lower for college graduates.

Message #4: Student debt has spiraled out of control in the last decade. It is now over one trillion dollars. Be one of the smart ones and borrow what you absolutely need to attend college. Don't just blindly borrow the maximum amount allowed.

Message #5: Consider going to a state college or similar institution for two years, get a great start, and transfer to a more selective and expensive institution later. As you look at the chart comparing the cost of five University System of Georgia institutions, you will see that the cost of one semester at one state college is almost exactly one-half of the cost of another larger and more selective research institution.

There are, of course, many more messages to share, but these five provide a solid start. Now, when you send these young people in my direction, there is the message I share with them about my expectations of them. Please note that the list includes an expectation that they understand the impact of their behavior on the young people who hold them in such high esteem. In closing, let me share a brief story illustrating this impact.

The EGSC Bobcats went to the NCAA championship tournament in 2013. Following a thrilling win in round one, the team developed a large following of grade schoolers in Hutchison high school. Round two didn't go as well. A close loss. The team exited dejectedly to the locker room where Joyce and I went to wait for them. We were amazed to find a large crowd of young fans awaiting the team as well. They could not care less that their heroes had lost the game. The team emerged from the locker room, surprised at the crowd to say the least. A young boy blurted out, "It's my birthday!" One player quickly rose to the occasion. He pulled out what appeared to be a size sixteen basketball shoe and had the team sign it for the young boy. In the young boy's mind, it could not have been better if it had been an Air Jordan signed by Michael. You could see the growth take place in the East Georgia players as they witnessed the impact of their actions on the boy.

So please do not forget the importance of what you teach your student athletes about life. They do hear your messages and it makes a big difference.

Thank you.