

Dr. Annette Nellen, Chair
Academic Senate

Dear Annette:

I regret that I will be unable to attend the Academic Senate meeting on April 19, because I will be out of town on that date. I have been following the recent email correspondence dealing with the athletics item on the meeting agenda. Since I cannot be present for that discussion, it seemed appropriate that I put my thoughts in writing. I ask also that, if possible, this letter be made available to the Senate members along with the other materials addressing the item.

Let me be clear that I do not oppose a Senate (and campus) discussion of athletics and its place in the university. Nor do I oppose the right and responsibility of the Senate to offer recommendations on the matter. Dialogues on contentious issues are the stuff of life for a university, and I welcome the opportunity for this particular contentious issue to engage the attention of the Senate. I note, though, that such issues are usually weighted with a substantial measure of complexity as well. That is the case, in my opinion, especially when the issue is athletics. Accordingly, I would like to offer some observations on the complex nature of the item before the Senate on April 19.

I should comment first on my views of several possible motions the Senate may consider on this occasion. I support the proposal to reduce general fund support for athletics over the next five or six years. The recommendation to lower the general fund component of the athletics budget to a range of 35 to 45 percent over that period of time seems a sensible one to me. I understand the proposal to add to that recommendation a phased reduction in the percentage of general fund contribution to the athletics budget. Taken as a statement of serious objectives which are to be monitored and discussed on an annual basis, I can support this concept as well. However, I do not favor the attendant action that would require the president, if the targets are not met in any two successive years, to “immediately engage the campus to develop and implement a plan...” I doubt that the next president would find this proposed, peremptorily expressed action acceptable either, though of course I do not know that to be the case.

Regarding the petition that the university remove itself from its current NCAA classification as a Division I A institution, I need to say that, while I understand the depth of feeling and seriousness of purpose underlying this recommendation, I am strongly opposed to the action it contemplates. The petition provides an example of the complications inherent in considering future possibilities for intercollegiate athletics at San Jose State. As you know, Division I has three subdivisions: I A and I AA, which relate to two distinct levels of NCAA football, and I AAA, which is a category for Division I institutions that do not have football. The petition leaves unanswered the important question of what SJSU’s next classification should be. Each of the alternative possibilities – I AA and I AAA, and possibly Division II or III (and football or no football as options in these two cases) – carries with it the need for careful, comprehensive examination of the financial and other ramifications for the university.

There would probably be risk involved in any of these choices. I respectfully suggest that the departure recommended by the petition leaves us uncertain as to where we would be going, how we might get there, and what difficulties we could face along the way.

The petition apart, there are other important elements of the athletics discussion that need further study and enhanced understanding. Therefore, I favor the idea of a task force, broadly representative, to examine the roles and relationships of athletics at San Jose State. That kind of study would allow for the complexity of the subject to receive full consideration. The effect on private fundraising is one subject that can benefit from this approach. It has been suggested that there would likely be little long-term impact on private giving to the university should we vacate our I A classification. Other CSU schools, it is noted, have left I A and dropped football without losing philanthropic ground. Long Beach State and CSU Fullerton are cited as examples. I do not find the examples persuasive. Every university is different in terms of its athletic history and the importance of particular sports to the community it serves. Long Beach State and CSU Fullerton differ considerably from San Jose State in these respects. Without an in-depth study with regard to possible fundraising impacts, I do not believe it prudent to assume that the experience of other institutions should be taken as applicable to what we could expect at SJSU.

My experience during the last 10 months is that there are many, many people – in the community, on the campus, and, as far as alumni are concerned, around the country – for whom San Jose State athletics and I A standing are consequential matters. I asked our Office of Institutional Advancement to look into connections between athletic and other donations to the university. Focusing on a group of 240 donors who have given \$10,000 or more over their donor lifetimes to date, the research tells us that those who started out giving to athletics have provided other SJSU programs nearly \$6.5 million, in addition to the \$8.5 million contributed to athletics. We also looked at a larger donor group, numbering 2,020 and without the \$10,000 factor but measured according to the same standard (i.e., those whose initial gift was to athletics). In this instance, the totals were \$10.1 million for athletics and just over \$7 million for other university programs. The approach in both these cases does not cover other significant relationships between athletic and non-athletic philanthropy. For example, it is clear that one foundation, whose initial, moderate donation had been directed to a campus need other than sports programs, made a gift of \$2 million to the new library that was directly connected to the relationship our athletic department built with that entity over a five to six year period during which the foundation also made a \$1 million donation to athletics. There is further testimony of similar import that can be brought to light.

This spring, the university established the Tower Foundation, with a goal of substantially improving (indeed, tripling) the amount of private dollars raised each year. Without a clear understanding of what a major change in our athletics program (e.g., leaving I A) might mean for this goal, we would be well-advised to spend our time building that understanding before looking toward major changes. It would be useful as well to consider how the university can improve its capability to be an important source of integrative energy for the community. We ought to be developing (and I am confident we

can) our abundant potential to serve the region as a unifying force. Again, athletics can play a role here, as it does in many other communities.

I have observed on several occasions during my time here that there is a window of opportunity at hand for San Jose State athletics. The Campus Village project will ultimately place 6,000 students in on-campus living quarters. We are afforded here a chance to add a sizable residential component to campus life and culture. The entire institution can profit from this addition, and, with proper planning, athletics can be among the beneficiaries. The focus on institutional advancement activities initiated by President Caret offers a favorable prospect for facilitating and coordinating efforts at marketing and fundraising now widely scattered around the campus. We can use this new emphasis to assemble and articulate the integrated vision, the image, and the institutional purpose that community leaders and alumni tell us – repeatedly – we lack. Our athletics program needs to become part of this initiative and, once more, can benefit from its successful implementation. These are the developments that can open up the above-noted window of opportunity.

I have participated in many conversations about SJSU athletics since I've been here – with faculty, students, fellow administrators, community supporters, alumni and alumnae, and athletics department personnel. It is time, in my opinion, for a different kind of conversation, an extended one in the course of which these groups, in a representative way, can talk with each other. There is much to be learned from that kind of conversation. It can lead the university to an informed and consensually shared set of conclusions about its athletics future. That is why I support the idea of a task force that can bring together the principal stakeholders. I believe the next president would welcome the idea. And I suggest the task force be proposed to him as a group he could create and charge, with input from the Senate and other appropriate entities and individuals.

There are those who argue that the athletics issue has been studied to death here, and that another study would serve no useful purpose. But times change, circumstances change, institutions change (and, of course, so do the people who lead them). San Jose State has seen all of these changes since the last president's task force on intercollegiate athletics submitted its report in February of 1992. The making of a major decision on a major university program should take these changes into consideration. There are matters involved, important matters, about which ample claims are made but accurate and adequate information is lacking: What would leaving I A (and ending football or changing its classification) mean for the athletics budget? What would be the impact of such a move on the donor community? What is the extent of support among alumni and other supporters for retaining I A standing? Beyond that, how do community leaders, in the business and government sectors, feel about the matter? I have seen very little hard data on these questions. And there are other questions to pose as well. All of them can be placed on a task force agenda.

Maybe I can be forgiven for putting forward one more observation before closing. It is often said that university administrators around the country, particularly presidents, base much of their most consequential athletics decision-making on a desire to avoid the slings

and arrows likely to be launched by influential alumni and external critics. Presidential courage, it is suggested by some interested commentators, is a commodity in short supply in these situations. This is probably true in some cases. Despite opinions to the contrary, I do not believe it has been or is now an issue in play at San Jose State.

I apologize for the length of this letter. People privileged to serve as college presidents usually learn early on that athletics is the most visible element of institutional life and a responsibility that takes up a disproportionate amount of the president's time. Correspondingly, one also learns in this job that, handled wisely, athletics can be a significant asset in helping the university meet its principal missions. That can explain, perhaps, why this letter is so long. Thank you for your patience in reading it.

Joe Crowley
Interim President