



Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Has Crippled Undergraduate Education

Murray A. Sperber

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In this fascinating book, Sperber uses original research culled from students, faculty, and administrators around the country, to argue that what universities offer instead of a meaningful undergraduate education is a meager and dangerous substitute: the party scene surrounding college sports that Sperber calls "beer and circus" and which serves to keep the students happy while tuition dollars keep rolling in. He explodes cherished myths about college sports, showing, for instance, that contrary to popular belief the money coming in to universities from sports programs never makes it to academic departments.

Sperber's profound re-evaluation of college sports and higher education comes straight out of today's headlines and opens our eyes to a generation of students deprived of the education they deserve.

Murray Sperber has been acknowledged for years as the country's leading authority on college sports and their role in American culture. In the wake of Indiana University's decision to fire head basketball coach Bobby Knight last year, Sperber was in constant demand across the country--on television, radio, and print media--to comment on the profound and tragic impact of big-time intercollegiate athletics on higher education.

Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Has Crippled Undergraduate Education Details

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Caroline says

I finished this book over six months ago, but I still think about it probably weekly, if not more often.

This is one of the most illuminating and damning books I have ever read. Though written in 2000, it still feels absolutely pertinent to today's world of college athletics (with the exception of the kind words he has for Joe Paterno - oops.). It makes the whole thing look so... tawdry, particularly the behavior of the NCAA and its member school's athletic programs. The almighty dollar is king, and students are the ones who get the short end of the stick.

Perhaps one of the reasons this book resonated with me was that I felt that I could relate to so many parts of it. I've tutored student athletes for the past six years and gotten a peek inside the world of college athletics and the students' constant tug-of-war between sports and school. I was a member of an undergraduate honors program, which Sperber calls a "lifeboat" within undergraduate education. I attended graduate school at "Beer and Circus" school, where the football program is currently bleeding the larger university dry, finances-wise.

I would LOVE some sort of follow-up, particularly in light of the many scandals that seemed to have plagued college sports in recent years.

My only real complaint was that Sperber's survey techniques aren't particularly rigorous. He gets his data from distributing surveys in his classes and from the voluntary responses he has elicited from posting his survey online. It would be interesting to get truly representative survey results. Fortunately, if I remember correctly, these survey data are only used in a few of the chapters, so ultimately only a small nit to pick.

Michael Rubin says

Professor Sperber has written an informative book with "Beer & Circus".

The reasons to recommend the book are many. For readers like myself who know little of collegiate sports or their costs and benefits on universities today, it is an eye opener. Drinking and athletics have an increasingly dominant role in our society today. Beer on college campuses is not the same thing it was twenty years ago or even ten. The relationship of sports and student have become more complicated, more expensive and more costly over time. Over all drinking and athletics in college exists in a symbiotic relationship that has a negative impact on the student body of many colleges today.

As the book hammers home, the rise of both beer and college sports has more to do with making companies rich than anything else. Deans and students are seen as powerless pawns to the ever more savvy corporations.

I buy the premise. Companies prey on students and faculty and are getting better at it. College sports programs exploits students so coaches can make money. The classrooms of today suffer from commodization and having to subsidize other school pursuits. None of this is that surprising. The book does a good job of highlighting specific instances. It is a great examination of the state of universities today.

It's almost a great book. But there are two qualities of it that detract from his point.

The first is that the book is permeated with an air of condescension. The frustration of the author is apparent but instead of letting the reader come to any conclusions the author provides them both before and after his arguments. Sperber explains why he is uniquely suited to write this book. He was once into sports before becoming an academic, hence he understands both sides of the equation. There is an air of frustration with the buffoons who don't know how to address or recognize the challenges he enumerates. It is hard to take his viewpoints as objective if he is portrayed as the only one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind. I found myself checking on his facts much more than other books I have read.

The second is the web census that he uses throughout the book. Sperber confesses to not be a sociologist. He admits he doesn't know how to scientifically create a poll. Yet the one he does create, he appears to use as primary source for justifying his points. I agree with his points and find the amateurish poll to detract from them. The hard data from the poll I tended to disregard. The quotes added color but little substance for me.

Overall I view this book as a worthwhile read. It has affected the way I read news, opened up new worlds to me I never would have understood or considered on my own. Finally it made me reconsider what makes a good university in America today. This is a powerful book for the neophyte.

Oddly I also find it one that is hard to recommend.

Shawna says

Interesting premise, and I get that sports have ruined undergraduate education. But never showed the reader what to do about it - what should you look for in a good undergrad education or are you just supposed to suck it up and deal?

Karen Adkins says

While I'm in fundamental agreement with Sperber's thesis, he doesn't spend much time on the first half of this equation, so the book ends up reading more like a rant about what's wrong with big state schools these days.

Robert says

Well an interesting view point from someone who definitely is not a fan of the college sports biz. For some reason he thinks you should mainly go to college to learn instead of playing sports and drinking yourself into a daily stupor. I liked reading the chapter where he spoke on binge drinking and how it is ruining undergraduate studies. Although his facts were probably true I just kept finding myself daydreaming and reminiscing about my own college years of social drinking (and non-social drinking). Sperber did punch some holes through the idea that a good sports program will financially help your school. His work was more interesting then I thought it would be.

Paul Haspel says

Beer and Circus is a well-written and thought-provoking look at modern collegiate culture. Murray Sperber, of Indiana University, feels that major universities across the United States are cheating undergraduates of the first-rate education they deserve, instead providing athletic spectacle and a thriving party scene, the way a Roman emperor might once have offered his people "bread and circuses" to direct their attention away from the freedoms they had lost. Sperber provides some hair-raising examples of excesses relating to big-time college sports and the drinking culture that exists in college towns across America. Sperber successfully establishes that the college sports scene plays a disproportionately large role in the life of many American universities, and shows that collegiate drinking culture is likewise a significant problem nationwide. Yet I wonder whether Sperber proves that big-time college sports is a *cause* of the drinking culture. After all, there are smaller universities that do not have big-time college sports but do have an entrenched drinking culture. One could just as well argue that both the college drinking culture and the focus on college sports are symptoms of something larger -- perhaps, for example, the lingering anti-intellectualism of American life, a mindset whereby college is valued only as an opportunity to have responsibility-free fun for four years while securing the necessary credentials for a well-paying future job. Still, *Beer and Circus* encourages one to think hard about complex higher-education issues that defy easy solutions.

Michael Cawley says

A spot-on critique of the massive drinking problem on university campuses and its connection to college sports, which are often prioritized over undergraduate education, as well as universities' over-emphasis on faculty's research role as opposed to their undergraduate education role.

My biggest complaint about this book is Sperber's call to abolish lecture classes at universities. I think this idea is impractical to say the least, and I think Sperber's hatred of lecture courses is a little misplaced.

Lecture courses are the most efficient way to teach large classes, and while they can frequently be unengaging, students can actually learn from them if they pay attention and study.

Andy Greenhow says

In the spirit of the author's critiques about grade inflation, I'm giving this book 3 stars. I was already sold on what Sperber argues in the book and, while I learned some new outrageous facts about college sports, I cannot see him being very convincing to an oppositional reader.

Nevertheless, death to the NCAA.

Joe says

For all its faults, this book honestly changed the course of my life. I read it shortly before applying to college. I was, and remain, a serious college sports fan, and prior to reading Sperber's book I looked at teams that did well in football and figured, well, I'll go to one of those universities. Then I read Sperber's book.

Sperber argues that sports-and-party-based frat-boy culture is being capitalized on by colleges, who market their party atmosphere and great sports teams to draw in an ever larger pool of applicants. They then take the tuition money and spend it on their prestigious grad programs, not to mention millions for the advertising, er, athletic department, which draws in ever more applicants. Meanwhile, the universities don't spend any significant money on their undergrad programs. They hire great faculty but then treat their undergrads to 750-person lecture halls taught by assistants, not the hot-shot professors that are advertised. They have rampant grade inflation. They accept virtually everyone and let just about anyone through, degrading the quality and relevance of the undergraduate degree. Thousands of students might not learn much or get a good, comprehensive education, but they will have a drunken good time doing it, and the university still gets the tuition money.

This book has some problems. It makes sweeping sociological generalizations of college culture (any school with 30,000 or 50,000 students cannot be fairly divided into three or four categories of student, as Sperber attempts). It has an obsession with the movie Animal House. It sometimes strays from its general thesis into other complaints. It's easy to come away with the general impression that a degree from a large state school is worthless, as is the education. (I think a fairer statement would be that you CAN get a good education from a large state school, but it's very easy to get a degree WITHOUT having gotten one.)

But the important message is this: big-time universities are using big-time college sports to draw in collegiates to an entertainment-based college experience, skimping on their undergrad programs, and using the tuition money to further fund sports teams and their extensive graduate programs to enhance their name and prowess. It's an academic pyramid scheme. The moral: for graduate education, go to Division I State U. For undergrad, try a DIII liberal arts school. Largely because of this book, that's what I did, and I haven't been disappointed.

Rose Be says

Here, let me sum up this book:

- > Undergraduate education is declining rapidly
- > Logical error!
- > Undergraduates everywhere drink beer all the time. Even the gluten intolerant ones, probably.
- > Overgeneralization!
- > Faculty are wonderful angels (Sperber is faculty) who sometimes can't be bothered to connect with their apathetic students.
- > Students are either collegians (drink all the time, don't care), academic (future faculty) or vocational (have a job, don't care about grades). Sperber admits no overlap-- clearly, students cannot work, have above a C average, and drink! It's just not possible!

In general Sperber makes factually insupportable claims about undergraduate life. He ignores the nuances of collegiate life, change over time, different students, different schools, etc. He come off as extremely bitter and condescending to students almost across the board. He also fails to anticipate possible counterarguments,

and does not cite sources well if at all.

If this were a college paper, I would give Sperber a D-.

James Carter says

Beer and Circus is an outstandingly written book about how big-time sports are undermining the quality of undergraduate education. I've been a witness to it based on my nine years of schooling experience from community college to graduate school.

Frequently, I've mentioned that at least 70% of the students do not belong in college because they lack the proper academic background; hence, they ruin the academic environment for everybody else. But the professors are not immune from criticism as many of them have ultimately failed in their task that they were paid to do: educating the students. That's why so many students who have survived the gauntlet and lasted this long to see the light at the end of the tunnel figure out how to game the system which is being independent learners. Of course, that's actually the aim of an university education, but it can last so long because once they are at the fringe of their capabilities, it's really time for the professors to step in to guide them for the rest of the way for ultimate enlightenment. Unfortunately, it rarely happens, and that's pretty sad.

The last 20 years, I have boycotted college football and basketball because they permeate a culture of corruption. The root of it is money, and undergraduate students are getting shafted on a daily basis. I can never fathom how many of them can afford it and still gladly fork over more money. The obvious answer is: it's not their money but their parents'. Hence, they (usually, the collegians) don't understand the value of the dollar. I wish someday that the bubble will finally burst, and these corrupted big-time Div I-A schools will be largely affected by it. Time will only tell.

In the final chapter as regards to "What Should Be Done?," the simple answer is: throw sports out of college and make it an independent organization. It's the most sensible solution. College should be about one and only one thing: education.

All in all, *Beer and Circus* is the most definitive book about how big-time college sports is crippling undergraduate education, and the situation has not changed to this day.

Jake says

I would have liked this more if he had actually focused on the detrimental effect big-time athletics has had on the quality of education in many American universities. Unfortunately, save for a few chapters at the beginning and end of the tome, this is a well-researched rant by Sperber, where he takes on not only the disenchanting and egotistical faculty at research universities, but also the spoiled, drunken, cynical students who have come to populate their classes.

Overall, it's a depressing and off-task book, with potential to do so much more.

Katie says

I think I will never watch an NCAA Division I game again. Sorry, Horns... So long, Lions... Screw you, Illini. I used to like college football, even though I can't really keep my mind on it, but oh well. Sports fans, university administrators: beware this book. Well, I mean, unless you want to read a good book.

Here is how the NCAA and its supporters are destroying undergrad education: by encouraging sports scandals, binge drinking, and irresponsible behavior that disgust the public and discourage public and private support for higher education; exploiting the free labor of college-athlete entertainers while calling them students; running chronic huge deficits in athletic departments which are covered by the university, thus diverting funds from academic programs; using big-time sports and their attendant party scene ("beer-and-circus") to distract students from the lousy education they are receiving at large public universities.

Sperber is a recognized authority on what he calls "big-time college sports," meaning, for the most part, Division I-A football and basketball. This book is based in part on a survey of thousands of students at Division I (e.g. the University of Texas at Austin) and Division III (e.g. Ohio Wesleyan) schools about their experiences with academics, sports, and social life. He also interviews administrators, athletic directors, sportswriters and coaches, reviews educational policy and theory, and examines the economics of college athletics in some depth.

How is big-time sports destroying big-time universities? It's all about the money. The \$75 *billion*-dollar industry that is big-time college athletics (ten years ago. Bet it's more now. But betting's part of the problem, innit). Contrary to myth, Division I-A sports do not pay for themselves. Big-time athletic departments routinely mismanage their own money, stay in debt, divert funds from their universities, dodge taxes, and sometimes are involved in expensive scandals. NCAA regulations require huge, state-of-the art sports stadiums and practice facilities, and athletic directors coax and bribe more goodies out of supportive administrators, from obscene salaries to multimillion-dollar junkets to bowl games for 800 people, including faculty spouses. NCAA contracts with the media lure schools into big-time sports with the promise of more admissions and more alumni donations—false promises, as it turns out. And the more money the big public universities devote to sports, the less they have to devote to educating undergrads. Sperber does an excellent job of breaking down the costs of big-time college sports and showing where the money goes.

Quality undergraduate education is expensive. College sports are expensive. Division I schools, with very few exceptions (like Rice), pay for sports and cheap out on education. The cheapest way to teach is to cluster a lot of students into an auditorium and lecture at them, then give them a multiple-choice test. It's also the least effective way. And it's the way students at large state schools are usually taught in their first couple of years, when they most need active, cooperative learning experiences. Meanwhile, these schools pour resources into their honors programs, steering a handful of top undergrads into small seminars, priority scheduling, "quiet" dorms and mentoring relationships with faculty--in other words, giving the most able students the best teaching on campus. Is it any wonder that average students graduate with little to no education and a lot of hostility towards their schools?

The student surveys consistently showed that students at Division III schools took fewer large lecture courses, had more contact with professors, spent more time studying and less time partying, and were more satisfied with their education than those at Division I schools. Division I students expressed alienation, frustration and anger at their schools, and they also reported spending a lot more time drinking, and a lot more binge drinking. In fact, binge drinking is far more common on big-time sports campuses than at other schools. These students also spend millions of dollars a year betting on games, usually illegally, usually with

their parents' money. And contrary to popular opinion, alumni giving is in the toilet at Division I schools—except for a couple like Notre Dame that devote effort and resources to educating all their students.

The athletes themselves get an even worse education. In 1991, the NCAA passed a rule that college athletes could not be required to practice more than 4 hours a day or 20 hours a week at their sport. However, they can still *volunteer* to practice as much as they like, and in big-time programs those volunteer hours are more or less mandatory for any athlete who wants his scholarship renewed in July. This means that athletes routinely practice 40, 50, 60 hours a week, and then try to carry a full course load. They may not be paying money for their education, but they aren't majoring in chemistry or architecture, either. And the temptation to cheat is enormous (and all too often the opportunity is provided by the athletic department tutors).

Sperber devotes some time to showing how large universities build excellent research programs and graduate programs while neglecting undergraduate education. He explodes the pernicious myth of "great researcher=great teacher," demonstrating that very few top research professors are also good classroom teachers, while those who devote a lot of time and effort to teaching undergrads have neither the time or energy to do top-level research. I attended a university full of famous, invisible scholars and was taught by a lot of adjuncts, TA's, and assistant professors. Sperber's right. He could do a better job, though, at explaining the connection between emphasis on graduate education and research on the one hand, and big-time college sports on the other.

As he says, it is possible to get a good education at a big-time sports university. But the student who achieves this, does it in spite of, not because of the Horns, Hokies or Illini. Sperber ends the book with some creative and even realistic ideas for change, but adds that he does not expect much improvement. The book was published 10 years ago. Hope he is not disappointed that things have not improved.

Jason says

As a student entering my first year of college (to a university which the author might call a "Big Time U"), a family member strongly recommended this book to me. Murray Sperber's critique is extremely well written; an effective mix of anecdotal and empirical evidence as well as personal insight outline the crashing and burning of the 21st century undergraduate education. Sperber's coined term "beer and circus" (party and sports), a reference to Roman bread and circus, describes Big Time U's attempt to distract undergraduates by offering a party scene in place of quality education. The quotes and responses of undergrad students reveal a harrowing reality: many colleges offer degrees that are no more valuable than the paper it is printed on. Graduates are allowed to sift through four years of education, only to come out unable to perform simple arithmetic tasks, or read or write effectively. Sperber is blunt when it comes to criticizing the debacles of current college education, even condemning his alma mater. He highlights the fact that attempts to reform education for the better are nullified by corporate America and dollar signs. The growing importance of published national rankings have forced colleges to focus on graduate studies and research. Undergraduates have been left behind ever since.

This is truly a book that will change the way you think about big name colleges. Sports have overtaken all other priorities and have defeated the intentions that the founders of colleges once had. One cannot read "Beer and Circus" without a sinking feeling that the college degree is losing its value and that the future of American intellectualism is perishing with each graduating class.

Nathan19 says

In this book, Murray Sperber lives up to his sub-title and more in explaining that college sports in big time universities, along with university officials and careless professors, "are crippling undergraduate education." The title may suggest that it is only college sports "crippling" the undergraduate system, but also to blame is the faulty teaching system, wild partying and lack of commitment by those undergrads. Along with countless months and possible years of research, Sperber sent out a questionnaire to many big time universities and students to provide countless statistics, which shows the reader how detailed and factual this book really is. High school seniors must read this book to help them decide how they want to spend their college years, and if they want to get a true, valuable education.
