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By Joseph E. Aoun

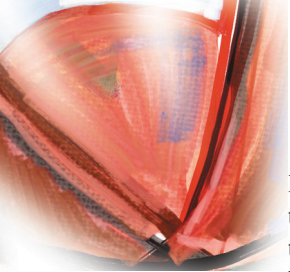
Game Changer

Academic communities embrace spirited debate. But when the discussion is about closing a longstanding program, it is much more than an academic exercise.

After announcing last November that Northeastern University would discontinue intercollegiate football after 74 seasons, I received substantial feedback—both pro and con—from our faculty, students and alumni. This was entirely expected.



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What I did not anticipate was the number of college and university presidents from around the country who personally reached out to me. Many cheered the decision—not because they are anti-football, but because in higher education, actions that threaten multiple constituencies are often avoided. Others asked, “How did you do it?”

Almost a year after our announcement to discontinue football, I have been asked to share a behind-the-scenes look at how we rolled out this significant and controversial change. While Northeastern’s decision is not without its critics, there seems to be consensus that the process was handled well. If this is true, it is a testament to a whole team of people, ranging from the university’s athletic director to its trustees.

The Decision: Framing the Issue

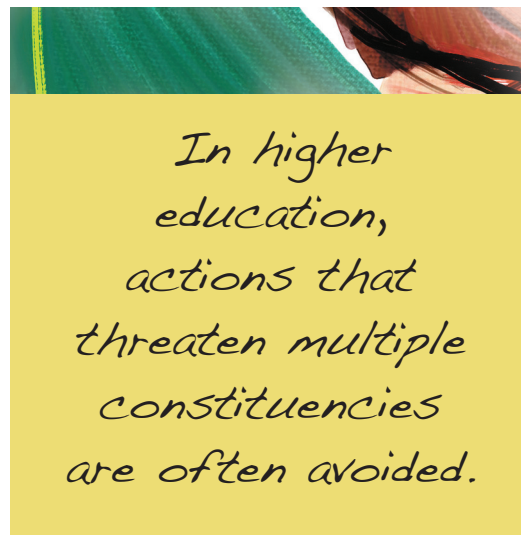
Shortly after I became president in fall 2006, the university undertook a strategic planning process. Working together, our community developed a new mission statement and Academic Plan. As part of this process, we established a clear criterion for future university investments: We would invest in programs—academic, athletic, extracurricular—that gave us an opportunity *to achieve and sustain excellence*.

The Academic Plan, shared with the entire Northeastern community, provided a framework for my colleagues and me to evaluate each of our ongoing programs, including athletics, from a fresh and critical perspective. Thus, when the athletic director looked at our varsity football program, he knew what questions to pose: “Do we have what it takes to achieve and sustain excellence on the playing field? Can we ensure that students who play football will have the support and resources needed to succeed?”

The facts were clear: Since 2004, the team had not posted a single winning season. The number of students attending games at our off-campus field continued to decline. More important than wins and losses was the heartfelt concern that our players did not have the opportunity to experience the thrill of victory.

It quickly became clear that for our football team to compete in a competitive Division 1 conference, the university would have to make multimillion-dollar investments, both immediately and on an ongoing basis. Although some initially thought we closed football as a way to *save* money during the recession, this was never the case. The question before us was *prospective*: Could we justify spending tens of millions of dollars in *new* funds to rebuild the program—an investment that, by definition, would come at the expense of other athletic priorities?

We returned to the baseline principle articulated in the Academic Plan—the idea that the university would invest in opportunities to *achieve and sustain excellence*. This could be in nanotechnology, global experiential learning, or athletics. The sphere was less important than the outcome. The one fact that everyone agreed upon concerning football was that the status quo was not an option. We would either make the substantial and ongoing investments to take our football program to a level of excellence, or we would discontinue the program altogether.



After carefully evaluating the evidence and considering all of the many factors, we made the decision to discontinue the football program at the close of the 2009 season. With the decision made, the task at hand was a successful implementation. Several principles guided our planning.

People First

While it’s tempting to focus on the public relations aspects of a decision like this one, we began by focusing on the human factor. We decided that all the underclassmen on the team—approximately 55 young men—would retain their athletic scholarships through graduation, regardless of their time to degree. For those who chose to play football at another institution, we supported and assisted them in this transition. (To date, 23 players have elected to stay and earn their degrees at Northeastern, while 32 have transferred to other schools.)

We took a similar approach with our coaches. While some people think of college football coaches as footloose journeymen who move on quickly after a losing season, we made sure to provide our coaches with good separation packages.

While these decisions about our students and coaches might appear to have been made for appear-



ance's sake, we made these decisions, first and foremost, because they were the right things to do. It is true that, in the end, doing right by members of our community stood us in good stead with many external audiences, but this was always a secondary consideration.

Throughout our planning, which included exhaustive speculation about impacts and reverberations around campus and elsewhere, we never wavered in our belief that our players and coaches should be treated with dignity and respect.

Teamwork

The day after the 2009 football season ended, Northeastern Athletic Director Peter Roby stood at a podium fielding questions from the press. He remained until the last question had been asked and answered.

Though Roby stood by himself, he was not alone. He had the full support of the university's leadership team and board of trustees. It is important to remember that Roby himself fully supported the decision—as did Philomena Mantella, our senior vice president who oversees student life. In fact, the decision grew out of their recommendation after a review of our athletic programs.

When the notion of discontinuing football began to surface internally, I decided that I did *not* want this to be a top-down decision. If it was perceived that the president or the board had delivered this verdict from above, I felt it would be destructive to the university and ultimately result in months or even years of strained relations within the Northeastern family.

Because the notion of discontinuing football was originating from our athletic department, it was my job to seek the support of the board by letting them know about the merits of the decision. This involved working in partnership with the chairman of the board. He recommended that we develop a detailed white paper that honestly and candidly outlined the issue. We also worked closely with the Student Affairs Committee, including numerous meetings and conference calls with the committee chairwoman and other members.

The key was for the board to feel ownership of the decision, while still trusting management to handle the details and the rollout. Ultimately this

work culminated in a full board meeting and a vote to discontinue our football program.

Execution

With the decision made, members of my senior leadership team developed a comprehensive and coordinated rollout plan. We wanted to give players the greatest amount of time to plan their futures, so we decided to announce our intentions as soon as possible. But we did not want to put a dark cloud over the remaining season, which meant waiting until the final game was played.

The goal was a Monday morning public announcement following the final Saturday game. In keeping with our principle of putting people first, we made sure to let the coaches and players know *before* we went public. This meant a series of Sunday evening meetings that were timed to the minute. First, the athletic director met one on one with the head coach. Next, he met with the assistant coaches. Then the most difficult part: telling 80-plus young men that they would be the last to wear their college colors on the football field.

We had to hold these meetings as late in the evening as possible. In the era of Twitter and text messaging, we knew that informing the players was tantamount to a public announcement. We also knew that their parents would know moments after the players were told. While the athletic director gave the news to the players, in another room a staff member sent an e-mail to all of the players' parents notifying them of the decision. We wanted parents to hear this news directly from the university, particularly the important aspect that all players on scholarships would retain this status through graduation.

There were also several donors and alumni leaders who warranted a Sunday evening heads up. Our alumni office swung into action and made a series of calls to this select group. In some cases, it was not a staff member but a trustee who had a personal relationship with a specific donor. It was an all-hands-on-deck situation, and people across the university did whatever was needed to notify our nearest and dearest.

The next morning at exactly 5:00 a.m., a broadcast e-mail message announcing the news was sent to all students, faculty, staff, and alumni—more than

200,000 people. This required a team of communications and IT staff, who simultaneously posted the news on our web site.

The e-mail message framed the decision in a way that reflected our message of achieving and sustaining excellence. Although we worked closely with *The Boston Globe* on an exclusive story that ran that morning, we were concerned that some media coverage would oversimplify the issue and present the decision as a matter of budget cutting. And so, at 10:00 a.m. that Monday morning, we held a press conference for news media, both local and national, to answer further questions. By the end of the day, the media inquiries began to slow down and we could see the arc of the story begin to descend. Over the next few days, students and alumni weighed in on all sides of the issue.

Beyond our campus, we continued to put people first. This fall, Boston public school students will use collegiate football equipment donated by the university.

I continue to believe that because the execution of the announcement went well, our community was able to discuss the merits of the decision, not

the process. As an academic institution committed to a vigorous exchange of ideas, we welcomed this debate on the substance of the issue. This is indeed what our institutions are all about.

Renewed Strength

I do not mean to say that our decision does not have its critics. Whenever you endeavor to do something this complex, there will be some hurt feelings within your community. We have seen this among our students, some longtime staff, and in our alumni ranks. Although we all knew there would be a certain amount of division, my goal was to have our differences bring us together, not develop into permanent fissures. In the end, I believe that we became a stronger community with a greater clarity of purpose.

All institutions that have limited resources—which is to say, *all* institutions—must make choices. As presidents, we are required to make these choices. As leaders, we are required to make them in a way that strengthens the people and purpose of our institutions.

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Risk management should take into account not only general program health and safety requirements, but also individual student health and well-being. Programs may opt to provide voluntary medical forms and encourage students to supply any relevant medical history, including mental health issues. Institutions also should have written policy for short-term programs, mandating that program faculty and administrators report any incidents to personnel at the home institution. Problems may arise when program staff are caught off guard in a foreign country with no written policy or training to deal with student mental health incidents. Support administration and resources must be available for consultation on an on-call basis when incidents arise in foreign venues in different time zones.

Another important factor is how local law and socio-political atmosphere may affect student conduct abroad. Institutions should take measures to educate students on the cultural norms of the foreign country and outline the scope of students' responsibility while abroad. Participating students should be required to sign a release stating that they understand they are subject to the laws of the foreign country and agree to comply with those laws, as well as the regulations and student conduct policies of the institution. The release should also outline grounds and procedures for dismissal from the program should the student fail to comply.

Safe and Sound

Systematic and consistent policy, resources, and support are critical components for all study abroad programs. Providing the necessary training and support for short-term programs is not only important to risk management and student safety, but it also encourages the growth of these programs. When colleges and universities take the appropriate steps to provide needed support and resources—at home and abroad—to ensure student safety and maintain the success of study abroad programs, these programs greatly enhance institutional efforts to educate global citizens.

Notes:

1. Green, M. F. (2005). *Internationalization in U.S. higher education: The student perspective*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. Available at www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/cii/pubs/ace/Inter%20student%20perspective.pdf.
2. May, P. F. (2010, March 21). 12 risky issues when hiring abroad. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available at www.acenet.edu/. Click on Legal Issues and Policy Briefs under the Government Relations & Public Policy heading.