

21 February, 1999

To: Arts College Faculty

From: Pete Wetherbee (English)

In re: Strategic Plan for Athletics

With the future of language teaching on everybody's minds, I don't know how many members of our faculty noticed last week's announcement of an open meeting to discuss the "Strategic Plan" for the Department of Athletics which is due to be presented to the Trustees in March. I am writing now to call people's attention to it, because I think we in the Arts College should ask to be given a fuller accounting of what it will involve in terms of the allocation of university resources, and why in any case a university like Cornell should be placing more, rather than less emphasis on intercollegiate athletics.

At the risk (a very small risk) of oversimplification, the gist of the Strategic Plan is this. Cornell suffers in the world's eyes because our intercollegiate athletic teams do poorly, and we are perceived as not caring. We should invest a great deal more money in our athletic programs and the related facilities, and recruit student athletes more effectively, with the aim of reaching the point at which our teams win 60% of their contests (instead of the current 40%), and we are consistently among the top three in Ivy League competition. Good things will follow. Prospective students will be impressed, alumni giving will go up, and the university as a whole will benefit.

I hope you are already wondering how all of this is to be accomplished. I certainly was, and so I was very glad to receive the announcement of an open meeting on the proposal. This took place on Wednesday in Call Auditorium. The Strategic Plan was unveiled by a panel which included the Director of Athletics and several supportive faculty members; a few previously submitted questions were raised and answered with dispatch, and the last 7 or 8 minutes were given over to questions from the floor. From beginning to end it was an outwardly cheerful occasion. The air was pink with bonhomie and bland assurances. All the same it left me feeling suspicious and dissatisfied, and I don't think I am alone in feeling this way.

On the other hand I may be nearly alone; the meeting was about as underpublicized as it could well have been, and it is very much to the credit of the Dean of the Faculty that it took place at all. Few people came, probably because, like me and most of my departmental colleagues, they had heard about it only the day before. Few of us had any prior knowledge of the existence of the Strategic Plan, and fewer still had seen the "confidential draft" that lays it out. As it happens I had seen this draft, and one of the things that struck me most forcefully at the meeting was the difference in tone and emphasis between the presentations made in support of the Plan and what the draft I read had to say about the same issues.

The confidential draft of the Plan makes clear what the Dept. of Athletics really wants: improved facilities, winning teams, and endowed positions for coaches and some staff. Eventually, it is suggested, the intercollegiate athletics program might become the department's sole concern, and the intramural and phys. ed. programs would be transferred to a separate unit. (NOTA BENE. This suggestion [p. 4, par. 3] is one of several hints embedded in the draft that the Dept. of Athletics, despite much lofty rhetoric about its commitment to enhancing the quality of life of the Cornell community, would just as soon shuck off its educational and recreational mission and concentrate on winning games.)

In a rare moment of candor, the confidential draft acknowledges that each of its initiatives will require "careful justification," which is putting it mildly. When and to whom such justification will be provided is another question. It certainly was not on the agenda of the Wednesday meeting, which was mainly an animated version of the empty rhetoric with which the proposals in the draft are interlarded, augmented by an array of rather insultingly simplified statistics. We were assured that the effect of the Strategic Plan on the rest of us will be minimal, but that in any case (since student athletes do as well as or better than students generally in just about every area) we will all be the better for it. We were invited to contemplate the dramatic growth in applications for admission and alumni giving at two peer institutions, Duke, which recently won the NCAA basketball championship, and Northwestern, which went to the Rose Bowl. The question period was so brief that it was impossible to focus in a serious way on any of the issues that the Strategic Plan raises for

the university at large.

And this brings me to my main point: the very chummy emptiness of the occasion was perhaps the most disturbing thing about it. Boosterism is the language the Dept. of Athletics speaks. They are on the front lines in the university's dealings with a large percentage of alumni, and they know how to make these alumni feel good. That they treated a faculty audience the same way was irritating, and I think we should maybe see it as humiliating. But it makes perfect sense.

Beyond attending an occasional game, most of us know little and care less about the role of the Dept. of Athletics in the work of the university. We may be vaguely aware that they have a say about admissions at a level from which most faculty are pretty much excluded, and we may be vaguely bemused by the amount of space they take up when the university displays its wares at reunion time. What the Strategic Plan brings home to me, and I hope to others, is that they have real power, and that they are not much interested in how their needs as they see them affect the rest of us.

The changes called for in the Strategic Plan threaten what could become a deep and perhaps irreversible alteration in the character of the university. It will fortunately be a long time before we go to the Fiesta Bowl or the Final Four. But any aggrandizement of Cornell's intercollegiate athletics program at the expense of our prerogatives as a university faculty is a step toward the big time, that professionalization of intercollegiate sports that is already a national disgrace, to say nothing of the more obvious kinds of corruption that follow sooner or later. I urge you to join me in calling on Day Hall to give us both a clear account of what the implementation of the Strategic Plan would involve, and an opportunity to obtain serious answers to the real questions it raises.