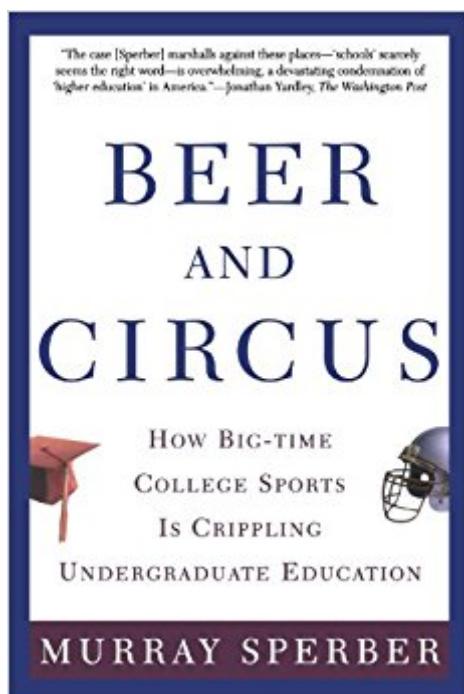


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# Beer And Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education



## **Synopsis**

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.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A stunning outline of the contemporary educational landscape, Sperber's book provides a stark analysis of academia's abandonment of its undergraduate students. Alluding to the ancient Roman practice of placating people with cheap bread and ostentatious spectacles, Sperber argues that an ever-growing number of state universities lure undergraduates to their schools with halcyon images of booze-filled parties and prominent sports programs while abandoning their commitment to the

students' education. Administrators use the students' sorely needed tuition dollars to fund sports, build research facilities and hire world-class faculty members, who give the school prestige but scarcely give their legions of undergraduate charges the time of day. With an eye fastened on the dangerous phenomenon of binge drinking, Sperber (College Sports Inc.) backs his assertions with responses to a questionnaire he circulated to students across the country, interviews with professors and administrators and frequent citations from sociological studies. Sperber methodically attempts to persuade readers that at the largest universities, where the majority of young Americans attain their undergraduate degrees, "the party scene connected to big-time sports events replaces meaningful undergraduate education." Though he admits his work deals mainly with anecdotal rather than scientific proof, the wealth of evidence Sperber amasses to support his convictions makes for a striking, sobering read. (Sept.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Sperber, an academic who has written extensively on college sports and their role in American culture (Onward to Victory: The Crises That Shaped College Sports), examines the impact of intercollegiate athletics on undergraduate education, particularly at large public research universities with high-profile football and men's basketball teams playing at the top National College Athletics Association level. Using questionnaires and interviews with students, faculty, and administrators in all parts of the country, he makes a strong case that many schools, because of their emphasis on research and graduate programs, no longer give a majority of their undergraduates a meaningful education. Instead, they substitute "beer and circus" -- the party scene surrounding college sports -- to keep their students content and distracted while bringing in tuition. Sperber uses concrete examples to make his case and concludes by offering a plan to remedy the situation, considering both what should happen and what will more likely happen. Essential reading for current and future university students as well as parents, educators, and policy makers, this is recommended for both academic and public libraries. D. Leroy Hommerding, Fort Myers Beach P.L. Dist., FL Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Here's one of the funniest anecdotes from "Beer and Circus." It's actually a Jimmy John advertisement, written by a witty undergraduate at an American college town: Q: HEY JIMMY JOHN: Why is the University president's house so big? A: The president represents all that is important to our school as an institution of higher learning. These hallowed and noble academic grounds are the fertile fields upon which the future of our nation is grown. And the University president and the

house he lives in must demonstrate to all the priority we place on this importation mission.Q: Why is the coach's house even bigger?A: No comment.Murray Sperber lacks the passion and the eloquence of Neil Postman, but he makes it up with the logic and craftsmanship of his argument. A professor of English and American studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, Professor Sperber is a contemporary of Bob Knight, the wildly successful coach of the UI basketball team who bullied his players as much as he bullied reporters and the college president. There's very little nuance and subtlety in Sperber's argument, mainly because he feels that there doesn't have to be. Right now, colleges are run like corporations with the mindset of the three Rs -- recruiting fee-paying students, retaining them, and renewing alumni support. Treating students like consumers has meant that colleges -- especially the publicly-funded state universities -- have turned away from their historical mission of turning out well-educated citizens of a democracy into a four-year playhouse in which students have access to be most lavish recreational and sports facilities, comfortable dormitories, and sports games -- but not to a professor who will challenge them to think critically and who will mark up the grammatical errors in their papers. That's because professors aren't supposed to teach -- they're supposed to be conducting research, writing books, appearing on CNN, and winning federal grants so that the colleges can look good.Professors don't teach, students don't learn, and American colleges have become nothing more than "beer and circus." That's about right.

Professor Murray Sperber presents a critique of giant, public, Research I/Division I universities, particularly of the low quality of education that many of their undergraduates get. It is well written and an entertaining read, and much of the criticism is spot-on correct. I think he misses some key points, though.These universities are a very American concept. They let in just about anyone. They take their money, and that's important for the existence of the enterprise. They then give the students a chance. Some do very well, even if they aren't in the honors college: I've seen it done. Some don't, but many of these seem placated with the "beer and circus" available at these schools.Professor Sperber doesn't seem to realize that education is fundamentally a self-directed activity. One gets out of it what one puts into it, and one needs to pursue it actively. If this message hasn't been made clear to students previously, it ought to be repeated to them clearly upon arrival at the university.Sperber does not like large classes, which are common at large universities. I agree that teaching them well does take special effort and skill. Still, several of the best classes I had when I was an undergraduate during the '70s had hundreds of students in them. They were good because the instructors knew their subjects well, and presented them well.Annoyingly many small classes I took were among the worst, for several reasons. Some instructors had poor

communications skills. Some clearly put little or no effort into their teaching, and frequently came to class unprepared. Disturbingly many didn't know their subject well, because they hadn't done any research in many years and so were out of date. I resolved never to be like that. Life loves its ironies, of course: now that I'm a professor, I have no shortage of students who squander the opportunities I knock myself out to make for them. Almost none of the students from my classes of over 100 ever come to my office hours for help. Whose fault is that? If you accuse me of being intimidating, oh honestly, are we dealing with adults, or with hothouse flowers? I have quite a lot to do during the day, so why should I spend my limited time on people who would get fired, if they did any job in the world the way they are doing college? Sperber decries honors colleges, which didn't exist when he was a student in the '50s, when "all students were treated equally." He doesn't seem to realize that attitudes have changed. College is no longer regarded as a privilege, as it was in the '50s: many students today see college as an entitlement. Honors colleges don't choose their students at random: they do so by academic merit, both before and during college. Students who did not do well in high school can still get into an honors college, if they build a strong record once they're in college. They can also get booted from an honors college if they let their grades slip. Honors colleges therefore do too improve the education of all students: they provide a goal for ambitious students to work for, they attract students who may have attended more selective universities, and by doing this they prevent everyone from sliding into mediocrity. Too much hand-holding can be harmful to education. I am often ashamed by how much I get wheedled into doing, particularly since so little of it appears to do any good. Peter Sacks discusses this in "Generation X Goes to College." I think the "sink or swim" approach often used at R1 universities has much to be said for it, particularly for cultivating student initiative. Why is it that universities are constantly criticized for being unlike "the real world," but then when one makes them that way, by holding students responsible for their education, the students so often resent it? During the 1960s, student protests did away with "in loco parentis," and instituted anonymous student evaluations of teachers. The students insisted that since they were over 18, they were entitled to be treated as adults. So, now that they say they're adults, who is ultimately responsible for their education? The students are! We have seen cases where reforms were attempted, and there was a hue and cry, which came from the students. One example was at Sperber's very university: remember the incident when someone threw a billiard ball through the university president's window when he tried to crack down on frats? Remember the "Right to Party" riots at Michigan State, made fun of by Doonesbury? Much of the logic that Professor Sperber uses to bolster his arguments is questionable. I really dig how he rips into "the student-faculty non-aggression pact." What, was this some sort of formal treaty, negotiated

by the United Nations and on display in a glass case at the National Archives?The research mission of the university is important, particularly since so little basic research is being done anymore by the private sector. Drop that ball, and it will be bad for the economy. It's true that just being a good researcher is not a sufficient condition for being a good teacher, but many of the worst instructors I had when I was an undergraduate were that way precisely because they were non-researchers. (I once had a good argument about the contrapositive with a philosophy professor during an intro to logic course, despite there being 600 other undergraduates in the class.)I agree that too much emphasis on athletics can be a bad influence. Still, Professor Sperber doesn't really make the case in this book that this definitely is detrimental to education. Maybe he does this in his other books, which I haven't read, but he doesn't do this convincingly in this one: it's no more than an argument equating correlation with causation.Some of the reviews above complain that these universities "cheat their undergraduates." They ought to realize that this would be quite impossible without these undergraduates' full complicity and enthusiastic participation. It has always been possible to get a good education at these universities. Spending 5-6 years in drunken stupor (seeÃ  Â The Five-Year Party: How Colleges Have Given Up on Educating Your Child and What You Can Do About It) is entirely avoidable.

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