When a colleague asked Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford, to name a good restaurant here last month during college basketball’s Final Four weekend, he rattled off six of his favorite places.

Mr. Harrison’s knowledge of Indianapolis reflects the more than 20 days a year he spends at the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s headquarters, thanks to his increasing role in intercollegiate athletics. He first agreed to serve the association four years ago. Now he volunteers on six NCAA committees, leading two of the association’s most influential groups.

Many athletics officials describe his service as extraordinary, but he is not without peer. Over the past few years, more college presidents and chancellors have started to devote increasing hours to college sports. Their involvement is one response to a wave of public concern about athletics programs’ financial accountability, coaches’ ethics, and athletes’ classroom performance and off-the-field behavior.

During the past year, Mr. Harrison has helped steer the NCAA through choppy waters. As chairman of the association’s Executive Committee, its highest governance body, he helped enact controversial rules limiting colleges’ use of American Indian imagery.

This week the Executive Committee and the NCAA’s Division I Board of Directors, on which Mr. Harrison also serves, will hear appeals from three colleges about whether they may continue to use their American Indian mascots in NCAA tournaments.

The board will also consider legislation prohibiting colleges from accepting students who attend bogus preparatory schools.

In the past two years, Mr. Harrison has volunteered hundreds of hours to help the NCAA tighten academic requirements for athletes. As chairman of the association’s Committee on Academic Performance, he helped establish the first penalties for teams that underperform academically. This week the Board of Directors is expected to establish more-severe punishments for programs that continue to lag behind.

Concern about the escalating costs of intercollegiate athletics led Mr. Harrison to join the Presidential Task Force on the Future of Division I Athletics. The group of about 40 presidents and chancellors, which was established last year by Myles Brand, the NCAA’s president, plans to release a report by early fall with ideas for improving college sports over the next five years.

The panel’s suggestions could lead some universities to reduce their athletics spending, change how they recruit players, and clamp down on how many hours athletes are allowed to compete in their sports.

The Chronicle caught up with Mr. Harrison at the Final Four to discuss what motivates him to play an active role in intercollegiate athletics, and what he sees as the biggest challenges in college sports.

Q. How did you become interested in sports?
A. I grew up in a blue-collar town outside of Pittsburgh. Most people came to work in the steel mills. My father and his father before him ran a men’s clothing store. It was not an intellectual atmosphere at all. But baseball became a very important part of my life. When the weather was right, I’d play baseball in the morning, go home for lunch, play baseball in the afternoon, and come back for dinner, then go play more at night.

For me baseball was an assimilation process. I loved the game, but it became my way of identifying myself as an American and of identifying myself with other boys who I didn’t have much in common with.

Howie poses with a big fan of the Hartford Hawks at a spring 2006 basketball game.
Q. And then you played college baseball?
A. I went to Trinity College and played a little bit of baseball, but not very much and not very well. But I love the game and have spent a lot of time thinking about it because I couldn’t play it that well. You admire things you can’t do yourself.

Q. Is that how you got the idea to write your dissertation on the sport?
A. I studied literature…and my adviser [at the University of California at Davis], who had just told me he would direct my dissertation on Hamlin Garland, asked me what I had been reading out of class. I told him about a book on baseball folklore. He said, “The world doesn’t need another dissertation on Hamlin Garland, but everyone would like to read one on baseball.”

Q. Describe your first administrative job, at Colorado College, and how it helped you understand college sports.
A. Among my duties was to be the sports-information director. I think I’m one of the few college or university presidents who has been a SID. It’s actually really helped me understand intercollegiate athletics. I have a greater appreciation for the central importance of the coach. It’s easy to underestimate the role coaches play until you’re actually working with them every day.

Q. Later, as vice president of university relations at the University of Michigan, you helped investigate allegations that a booster was paying off several men’s basketball players. What did you learn from that experience?
A. We spent months investigating this. But universities don’t have subpoena power, and although we got a lot of bank records from the players’ families and we were all dedicated to finding out the truth, quite honestly we couldn’t find much except a few minor problems.

As I was leaving Michigan, the U.S. attorney announced he had found more things. He became interested in the booster as an alleged numbers runner, and went after him on racketeering charges. He had subpoena powers and found an awful lot of things that greatly embarrassed the university.

Q. How can college presidents exert more control over boosters?
A. That’s a really hard question. Whenever the NCAA finds loopholes or places where regulations can be skirted, it has to tighten them up as much as possible. I think college presidents have to set a complete no-tolerance atmosphere. They must make it clear that fans of sports are very important, but there is a very bright line they can’t cross.

Q. What is off limits?
A. Showing favoritism—giving seats to people because there’s money changing hands—is completely out of line.

Q. What about giving the best seats to major donors?
A. Seems to me there is a bright line between donors receiving better seats—I’m not sure it’s the best system, but it’s permissible—and money going directly to players or coaches.

Q. How do you feel about luxury suites?
A. The biggest threat to college sports is commercialism, and one of the areas I see commercialism encroaching is luxury boxes. I understand that they are revenue producers, but you’re establishing a moneymed elite who gets dramatically improved seats at a university, and I don’t think as universities that’s a message we ought to be sending. As an American society we ought to be sending a message that we are egalitarian.

Q. Are commercial interests becoming too strong for athletics programs to resist?
A. I certainly think there are a lot of building influences, but I don’t think they are too strong. They require the strength that

—Walter Harrison

The biggest threat to college sports is commercialism.
college presidents acting together can have. This is connected to the growth of televised sports. In the 1950s, when there was a single game of the week in college football, there were commercial interests even then—but they have exploded as the opportunities for televising games have.

There are lots of good things that have come from that. I’m a supporter of the CBS contract for men’s college basketball because it allows us to support hundreds of thousands of athletes in lots of other sports. But there is a bright line, and college presidents must say what is acceptable and what isn’t.

Q. Can you give an example?
A. Athletes, in my view, should never be put in a position where they appear to be endorsing a product. For me personally, I’m starting to wonder where the line is with coaches endorsing products. I’m not trying to restrict coaches’ ability to make money... But what are the kinds of products a coach should be allowed to endorse, and what is the implication of a coach endorsing a product?

Q. Congress is investigating stadium costs and excessive coaches’ salaries. Do college sports need government regulation?
A. I’m a firm believer in self-regulation. I think the NCAA is the exact right body to provide oversight.... But there are three positions one could take. One could be an apostate for it—everything’s fine, nothing needs to be changed. I’m not in that category. The other side says the system is too corrupt to be saved, we need to do away with athletics scholarships entirely and return to having only academic- and need-based scholarships. I’m not in that camp either. I see myself as a reformer of college athletics. I believe there is enough good about college sports that, with the right kind of leadership at the presidential level and at the NCAA, we can save what’s good and do away with what’s not so good.

Q. Should colleges be raising more money privately for athletics facilities?
A. Yes, I’d certainly agree with that. Different colleges face different pressures. In our case, I made a decision to raise the money ourselves to pay for our new athletics fields that opened this spring. I wanted to use the university’s bonded indebtedness for projects that serve greater numbers of students—like residence halls, or a science, engineering, and technology complex.

Q. What are the long-term consequences of taking on bonded debt for athletics programs?
A. You’ve just obligated your university to 25 or 30 years of paying back the debt service. You’re doing that based on expectations that you will continue to grow revenue. But I’m not sure how much more revenue can increase.

Q. Why should college presidents continue to play an active role in intercollegiate athletics?
A. Presidents, more than anyone else, have a holistic view of what a university is about.... Universities are very complex organizations, and college sports get more attention than most of the rest of the university combined, but they are only part and parcel of a much larger community. College presidents are in a position to understand that, and in a position to set tone, set rules, set limits, in a way that other people aren’t.

Q. Are the stakes higher now, making it more important for college presidents to be involved?
A. Yes, definitely. Certainly the competitive pressures are greater. One area is in recruiting. The increased pressure to recruit young men in sports like basketball has reached a point where presidents need to get involved in the conversation.

It’s my understanding that young boys in eighth or ninth grade are being brought onto campuses by [summer all-star] coaches under the guise of getting academic counseling from college coaches about the importance of taking math or whatever. There’s some real danger in that because those kids are not mature enough to make decisions about where they should go to college.

It’s not illegal. And there is a need to provide guidance to young kids about the courses they’ll need to be eligible. But it’s hypocritical to say a summer coach and a college coach are the right people to provide that kind of information.

Q. What are the biggest issues college presidents will be looking at in the next year?
A. The single thing I’m most interested in is the implementation of academic reform. But through the presidential task force, you will start to see initiatives aimed at both the financial responsibilities college presidents face in controlling athletics costs and how they control outside influences.

Q. How has your involvement with the NCAA helped you become a better college president?
A. I certainly understand the context of university athletics a lot better, so it’s helped me try to develop our athletics department. For example, we are negotiating to hire a new men’s basketball coach, and I understand the typical arguments an athletics director is likely to use. I wasn’t quite as susceptible to listening to the argument about what so-and-so is paying their coach.

Q. What do you enjoy most about college sports?
A. There’s nothing I know of that’s as exciting as being at the Final Four. My real predilection is for baseball, but to sit in that dome and watch 43,000 people scream their heads off for four teams is an unmatched experience.

I also think college sports really brings people together as a community in a way that very few other things can. We are about to name a new men’s basketball coach and a new graduate-school dean. If this was a perfect world, the new graduate-school dean would get as much publicity as the basketball coach. He certainly will influence more people’s futures. But it’s not a perfect world, and the wonderful thing about sports is that it does galvanize people and give them a common bond.