Punting our Future College Athletics and Admissions

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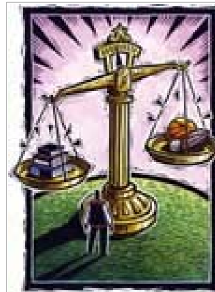

Imagine, if you will, a country with 50 or so elite colleges and research universities that collectively train a significant number of the research scientists, academics, business leaders, and political leaders in the industrialized world. Attracting applications from the most accomplished high-school students around the world, such institutions are able to admit only a small fraction of those who apply. They have tried to select students who show the greatest potential for achieving academic distinction (with due regard for the disadvantages they have had to overcome to date) and who are likely to go on to assume positions of intellectual, political, or economic leadership in society.

One day, someone proposes that such schools henceforth set aside 10 to 25 percent of their undergraduate slots for students who are really good cooks, requiring (in addition to demonstrated cooking skill) only that the applicants have amassed an academic record that is no worse than two standard deviations below the mean for non-chef admits. Everyone heartily assents.

The next year, a cadre of culinary talent scouts is sent out to scour the country for undiscovered cooking talent, at a cost of millions of dollars. The most promising cooks garner multiple offers from the country's equivalents of Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Williams, and Amherst and enroll in the thousands at such schools the following year. Some of those cooks would have been admitted even under the traditional academic criteria, but the vast majority would not. Once on campus, the cook-admits regularly whip up a great meal for the pleasure of some of their fellow students. They complete their academic requirements satisfactorily, but their academic records are undistinguished—indeed, a little worse than one would have predicted from high-school records that are, on average, one and a half standard deviations below the mean. They go on to have perfectly successful lives by any normal measure, but relatively few of them achieve distinction in intellectual or public life.

If you find yourself perplexed as to what would ever induce leading universities to make such a bizarre allocation of resources, then you can sympathize with the incredulity with which academics in every other part of the developed world regard higher education in the United States. For, as James Shulman, William Bowen, and their coauthors have documented in two much-discussed books—*The Game of Life* (2001) and *Reclaiming the Game* (2003)—the ability to hit a baseball a few feet further or swim a lap a split second faster than most other high-school athletes now plays roughly the same role in admissions to elite U.S. colleges and universities as do cooking skills in my little fable. How did we get to this place, and can it possibly be justified?

Jeremiads about intercollegiate sports have been around for about as long as intercollegiate sports. In recent decades, critics have focused on headlines about abuses involving the big-time, NCAA Division IA sports teams, citing elite Division III schools and the Ivies as the poster children for reform. Unlike Division IA programs, whose athletes are often students in name only, the

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latter schools can point proudly to their scholar-athletes, who must meet demanding academic standards to be admitted; who graduate in the same numbers as non-athletes; and who play for love, not money.

The Shulman and Bowen studies, alone among recent critiques of intercollegiate sports, take aim at those poster children. By focusing on intercollegiate athletics in its most academically respectable form, the authors force us to confront the fundamental question raised by intercollegiate-sports programs, at elite schools as much as at non-elites: Why should the ability to hurl a football a little bit farther than the next guy play any role in allocating educational opportunities, let alone a decisive one?

Before attempting an answer, let me briefly summarize where we are now and how we got there.

Where We Are Now

In *The Game of Life*, Shulman and Bowen collected and analyzed data from 30 elite colleges and universities across the country through the early 1990s—some in Division IA, some in the Ivies, and some in Division III. The book triggered much discussion in the press and soul-searching among faculty, administrators, and students. In its wake, a number of schools undertook self-studies of their athletics policies, and the presidents of the 11 schools that make up the New England Small Colleges Athletic Conference (NESCAC)—Amherst, Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Connecticut, Hamilton, Middlebury, Trinity, Tufts, Wesleyan, and Williams—asked the Mellon Foundation to do a follow-up study of all the NESCAC schools through the end of the 1990s. The results of that follow-up study, as well as a parallel one undertaken for all of the Ivies, are presented in *Reclaiming the Game*, coauthored with Sarah Levin. There are some differences in the findings of the two books, but their main conclusions are consistent.

Both studies document the steady professionalization of intercollegiate sports over the past four decades at elite schools. The authors examine a number of issues regarding intercollegiate-sports programs at those schools, but their central concern is the role of *recruited* ("tagged" or "tipped") athletes, high-school students who end up on the coach's list of picks for the team and whose names are forwarded to the admissions office for priority consideration. Most of the reforms recommended in the book are limited to these recruited athletes.

The authors' main findings with respect to athletic recruits concern three issues: admissions preferences, absolute numbers enrolled, and academic performance.

Admissions Preferences

In the entering class of 1995, SAT scores for male recruits in high-profile sports were, on average, 140 to 165 points lower than for non-athletes. For men in lower-profile sports and female recruits in all sports, average SAT scores were 60 to100 points lower than for non-athletes. Recruited athletes in all groups were much more likely (on the order of 1.5 to 4 times) to get into these schools than are non-athletes, controlling for academic records. By either measure, the admissions advantage given recruited athletes is greater than that enjoyed by any other group of applicants, including legacy and minority admits.

Percentage of Student Body Admitted as Recruited Athletes

In the entering class of 1995, athletic recruits accounted for 16 percent of the men and 11 percent of the women in the Ivies and 24 percent of the men and 17 percent of the women in the NESCAC.

If anything, those numbers understate the role that sports plays in admissions. This is because the Shulman and Bowen studies focused only on "recruits," ignoring the preferential treatment of the "protects"—athletes with academic credentials that would make them plausible academic admits without regard to athletic achievement. By informal understanding, admissions offices "protect" such candidates—meaning, virtually guarantee them admission as straight "academic" admits—without the coaches' having to count them against the total "recruit" slots allocated to the team. The numbers involved are significant. In 2003, for example, Williams enrolled 30 students as "protects," in addition to 66 "recruited" athletes. In 2005, Amherst enrolled 50 to 60 athletes as "protects," in addition to its 66 recruits. If (as appears true)

athletic achievement is a sure way for these applicants to vault ahead of thousands of other equally qualified students, then athletic achievement is playing a decisive role for "protected" admits as well.

Two principal factors account for the dramatic increase over the past 30 years in the numbers of athletic admissions. The first is the steady spread of the "professionalized" model—in which teams are staffed with athletic recruits rather than walk-ons—from a few select high-profile sports on campus to more peripheral ones. Because only 40 to 50 percent of the students admitted as recruited athletes are still playing on the team by the end of four years, for every one position each of these teams decides it "needs" to fill, it must get the school to admit roughly two recruits.

The second factor is Title IX. Enacted in 1972, Title IX mandates gender equity in all educational institutions receiving federal support, including sports programs. Schools could have responded to Title IX by ditching their professionalized male model of athletics in favor of the old amateur model and then extending equal opportunities to men and women to participate in that reconstituted world. Instead, they left men's programs largely intact and added roughly equivalent opportunities for women. The consequence has been to more or less double the problem.

The big beneficiaries of that choice, of course, are recruited female athletes. Whether schools' response to Title IX represents a victory for women's equality overall seems to me a much harder question. Given the relatively inflexible target of 50/50 admissions for men and women at most of these schools, the losers in the zero-sum world of admissions to these schools are not men. They are other women applicants who couldn't tell one end of a lacrosse stick from another but who offer talents (academic and otherwise) that might be thought to be more central to the academic mission and to better prepare them to take up positions of leadership in society. It is at least worth considering the possibility that feminists, looking at the larger issues of women's equality in the world beyond college, ought to regard this outcome as a Pyrrhic victory.

Academic Performance at College

Judged by traditional quantitative measures (GPA and honors), recruited athletes significantly under-perform once in college, relative both to non-athletes and (more surprisingly) to what one would have predicted from their entering credentials. As Shulman, Bowen, and their co-authors note, the reported disparity in GPAs almost surely understates the real gap in academic performance of recruited athletes, who in very large numbers select easier majors and the easier courses within them.

All of the authors' findings are, of course, just statistical generalizations. Some number of athletes at all elite schools are first-rate scholars who would have been admitted without regard to their athletic abilities and go on to have distinguished careers in college and beyond. But the Shulman and Bowen data show that that number is very low and represents only a small fraction of the students admitted each year as recruited athletes.

While critics have raised a number of valid questions about the studies' methodology and findings, most of the findings have been corroborated by the schools' own internal self-studies undertaken in the wake of the books' publication, as well as by candid off-the-record comments by administrators, newspaper accounts, and the many advice books that have flooded the market targeting would-be athletic recruits. Perhaps the most telling (if inadvertent) corroboration of the two-track admissions system comes from admissions officers and coaches in venting their anger at applicants who are admitted as recruits and then refuse to play the sport. To quote Kathy Delaney-Smith, the women's basketball coach at Harvard, on a hot basketball prospect she had recruited hard: "She never played one minute. She used me to get in. She would not have gotten in without me."

What Justifies the Status Quo?

Many Forms of Excellence

A host of justifications for current practice have been offered. Probably the one most frequently cited in public is the "many forms of excellence" argument: While elite universities' primary commitment is to academic excellence, they should reward (in the admissions process) and foster (once students are on campus) many other forms of excellence as well, including athletic achievement. Some version of this argument is ritualistically intoned

by virtually all college administrators, whatever their private views of current practice.

The argument invites, and trades on, the presumption that current practice simply puts athletics on an equal footing with a host of other extracurricular activities that count as "plus factors" in deciding between candidates with roughly equal academic qualifications. That presumption has given defenders of the status quo the rhetorical high ground to charge that scaling back athletic preferences would amount to discrimination against athletes, reflecting (in the words of one reviewer of *Reclaiming the Game*) the "reflexive hostility," if not outright contempt, that intellectuals feel for athletes.

But the Shulman and Bowen studies have established that we currently give hugely more weight to athletic excellence than we give to excellence in any other non-academic pursuit. All critics of the existing system would consider it a major triumph even to get close to the point where athletic skill was, indeed, put on an equal footing with distinction in other extracurricular activities. Until we do so, it is the existing massive discrimination *in favor of* athletics that needs to be justified.

Setting that huge problem to the side, what of the argument that athletic excellence is entitled to significant weight in college admissions, along with all other forms of excellence, even if not the full weight it is currently given? Let me start with what seem to me relatively uncontroversial observations.

A university's commitment to "excellence" (meaning the highest possible levels of absolute achievement) cannot be a commitment to advancing "excellence" in every field of human endeavor. In a world of scare resources, choices have to be made in light of the university's priorities. The "many forms of excellence" argument does not help universities make those choices; it simply obscures the need to do so.

The decision by elite colleges and universities to put academic excellence first does not imply a value judgment about the absolute worth of different forms of achievement in society. It simply reflects a commonsensical commitment to specialization. The NFL does a darn good job of promoting and rewarding excellence in football. It does not need Amherst's help. The NFL is, on the other hand, doing nothing to develop excellence in the sciences, the arts, law, medicine, etc. That's our job.

The same is true for decisions to count non-academic achievements as "plus factors" in admission. Some achievements typically count for nothing at all in elite schools (excellent cooking, drag racing). Others count for a lot (being an accomplished viola player, editing a school newspaper, devoting a substantial amount of time to public service). Here, too, the choices schools make do not necessarily reflect a judgment about the absolute worth of different achievements; they reflect a judgment about their relevance to the academic mission.

That brings us to the controversial part: What is the relevance of athletic excellence to the academic mission, such that it deserves significant weight in the admissions process? When the cult of athleticism took root in elite American education at the end of the 19th century, the answer to that question was clear. "Manliness" was regarded as the highest virtue the ruling class could aspire to, and physical excellence was the highest expression of manliness. So when Endicott Peabody founded the Groton School in 1884, self-consciously modeled on England's elite public schools, he made it his mission to impart to the sons of the American social elite the same "muscular Christianity" that British public schools instilled in their students, to ward off the feared "feminization" of upper-class men. Physical deprivation and participation in sports were, in Peabody's view, key to that mission, and excessive intellectuality was to be avoided at all costs. His view was enshrined in the social hierarchy of Groton and the other "St. Grottlesex" boarding schools founded in quick succession—as well as in the Ivies, for which they rapidly became feeder schools.

There is perhaps no starker example of the high moral status athletics had assumed in elite education by the turn of the century than the 1905-07 fight over whether football should be abolished at Harvard, a fight that lined up then-Harvard President Charles W. Eliot against then-U.S. President Teddy Roosevelt—or, in Roosevelt's words, the "mollycoddles" and "futile

sentimentalists" against those who believe in "manliness" and "the great fighting features of our race." Manliness won.

Changing mores have not been kind to the cast of characters that gave rise to the cult of athleticism, with "muscular Christianity" and "virile, masculine, red-blooded he-men" arrayed on one side, and "pansies and poets and serious la-de-da types," "decadent esthetes," "Communists," "white-faced-grinds," "neurotics," and of course "feebled, stunted" sickly Jews on the other, as grim reminders of the alternative. No admissions director today would think to defend publicly the choice to admit an athlete over an academically more qualified student on the grounds that (in the words of one former Harvard admissions director) "we just thought he was more of a guy," just as none would defend a central place for athletics in higher education by arguing that physical excellence is the seat of Christian moral virtue. But the valorization of athleticism that such beliefs gave rise to persists a century later, albeit stripped of its overt ties to scientific racism, religion, sexual preference, politics, gender, and self-confident anti- intellectuality. What then, if anything, justifies its persistence?

Defenders these days tend to focus less on the intrinsic merits of athleticism and more on its instrumental connection to virtues that further academic and other forms of excellence: setting high goals, discipline, teamwork, and leadership. There are two possible claims here, and it is not clear which defenders have in mind: that the rigors of athletic competition inculcate virtues students are unlikely to acquire from other sources, or that the sorts of students who excel in competitive athletics have thereby demonstrated that they already possess virtues (discipline, etc.) that can be predicted to lead to success in academic and other arenas.

These are very different claims, which imply very different policies, neither of which we are now pursuing. The first suggests that a rational school would not count athletic ability in admissions decisions but rather would require that all students participate in competitive athletics once enrolled. The second suggests that athletic achievement should count heavily in admissions as a proxy for other virtues, but that schools should be indifferent to athletic participation once students arrive on campus.

But in fact there is no credible evidence to support either claim. This is indisputable with respect to academic achievement. If athletic achievement either caused or correlated with academic achievement, that fact should be reflected in athletes' superior academic performance in high school—in which case we would have no need for athletic preferences in admissions—as well as in college. Instead, as the Shulman and Bowen data document, just the opposite is true by all quantitative measures.

It is harder to assess claims that participation in athletics inculcates or screens for nonacademic virtues that are important to a successful life (leadership, character, public service, professional achievement, ability to work with others, etc.), because there are no ready measures, or even agreed-on definitions, of most of those traits. The one exception is future income. Past studies have found that male athletes earn more than other male graduates, mostly as a result of taking jobs in the for-profit sector at higher rates than non-athletes. But the difference is small and shrinking. There is no wage gap at all for women athletes.

While public rhetoric stresses "the many forms of excellence" argument, in private people cite a number of other, "real" explanations for athletic preferences.

Intercollegiate Athletics as Moneymakers

Many people believe that universities tolerate quasi-professionalized athletics programs because such programs make money for the university, through sports-related revenues and increased alumni donations. But they don't. Fewer than a dozen universities in the country show a profit on their sports programs, and all of these are Division IA schools with major basketball and football programs. Intercollegiate programs at the schools that are the subject of the Shulman and Bowen studies are all net revenue losers, in many cases to the tune of millions of dollars a year. (Indeed, losses are probably systematically understated, because capital expenditures are often not included in costs.) There is likewise now a substantial empirical literature—some of it coming out of the Shulman and Bowen studies—showing that (contrary to conventional wisdom) alumni donations have no correlation

to the success of the school's sports teams.

Athletic Preferences as a Means to Greater Diversity

It has long been taken as an article of faith that sports are a democratizing force on college campuses. In fact, historically, just the opposite was true at elite Eastern schools, where most varsity teams started out as bastions of privilege, disproportionately populated by prep-school boys and closed to Jews and the few racial minorities on campus. While the racial demographics have changed dramatically in men's high-profile sports, underrepresented minorities make up a smaller percentage of athletic recruits as a whole than they do the rest of the student body. Among the schools examined in *Reclaiming the Game*, the only subgroup of recruits for which this is not true is male athletes in high-profile sports at the Ivies.

Data in *Reclaiming the Game* suggested that athletic preferences might add slightly to the socioeconomic diversity of the student body. Self-studies subsequently undertaken by Amherst, Williams, and Middlebury, however, found otherwise. Athletes in all three schools were both wealthier and less ethnically diverse than the rest of the student body. That trend, if anything, is likely to be exacerbated in the future, as the increasing professionalization of college athletics forces a steady, and very costly, professionalization of athletics in high school and even earlier. These days, it is not uncommon for parents to spend as much as $30,000 a year on private trainers, equipment, travel with elite club teams, marketers, etc., to position their kids as athletic recruits. At that price, athletic preferences will become just one more edge in the admissions game for the already most-privileged kids.

Finally, if the goal is in fact to increase representation of historically disadvantaged groups, there are much more efficient ways to achieve it. Shulman and Bowen's data show that racial minorities and economically disadvantaged students who are admitted as athletic recruits have, on average, academic credentials that are *significantly worse* than the weakest students admitted without regard to athletic ability from both target groups.

This is hardly surprising. Selecting for non-academic criteria that are not correlated with academic performance will, on average, require the university to lower the bar on academic performance. It follows that if colleges abolished athletic preferences entirely and redirected a portion of those freed-up slots (not to mention recruiting budgets) to the academically strongest minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged applicants whom they are now rejecting, they could increase the representation of both groups, with much better academic outcomes, than under the current system.

Everyone Loves a Winner

While the "many forms of excellence" argument stresses individual achievement, it's pretty clear that what schools really care about is producing excellent teams, not excellent athletes, and that "excellence" for these purposes is measured by the team's win-loss record in its conference and against traditional rivals. (It is measured, as well, by the schools's rankings in the Sears Cup competition for best overall athletic performance within each NCAA division.)

Why elite universities should regard a good win/loss record for their athletic teams as an end worthy of any significant commitment of resources is not self-evident. Hunter Rawlings, the interim president of Cornell, perhaps hit the nail on the head when he suggested that it is more important to colleges than other measures of success because it is more salient: "In sports, people keep score. If Haverford gives a music concert, no one scores it a C-minus. But if you play a basketball game and lose 87-42, everybody sees that in the newspaper the next day. There's no way around it. Your peers, your faculty, your students and your alumni all know the score. You lost, 87-42."

If this is in fact what's going on—and I suspect it is a very large part of it—then schools are locked in the ultimate zero-sum arms' race. However good or bad any team is in a given league, and however many resources (human and financial) schools pump into their teams, the one thing you can be sure of is that the average win-loss record in the league will be .500. This suggests that we could dismantle the entire system of athletic preferences without sacrificing "excellence" as it is currently defined, simply by getting all schools in a conference to ratchet back simultaneously. The College Sports Project, funded by the Mellon Foundation in the wake of the Bowen and Shulman studies, is quietly pursuing that strategy, with some modest successes to date.

Alternatively, schools could simply eliminate the opportunity for public humiliation by selectively eliminating intercollegiate teams—the solution that Swarthmore and other schools have opted for in abandoning intercollegiate football.

Intercollegiate Athletics as a "Consumption Good"
Finally, of course, watching one's school compete is just plain fun for many people. From the college's point of view, providing fun in this form helps cement school loyalty among past and present students, as well as bond the larger community to the school.

These are all good things that are certainly worth some portion of a school's resources. But it seems doubtful they warrant the enormous portion they are currently commanding in most private schools. (Public universities obviously face a unique set of political pressures that, in many cases, they have little choice but to accede to.) In the Ivies and NESCAC, only a handful of sports attract any significant audience; many attract virtually none. Even in high-profile sports like football, attendance has steadily declined during the same years that the level of play has steadily risen—a fact frequently lamented in alumni letters to the school papers. Low attendance is not the only sign of discontent. A majority of alumni, students, and faculty polled for the Shulman and Bowen studies said their schools placed too much emphasis on athletics and supported reform, a finding replicated in schools' self-studies. Given the steep decline in spectator interest among current students at these schools, alumni interest will likely continue to decline, as today's students are tomorrow's alumni.

All of this suggests a very small tail wagging a very large dog. To sustain a handful of high-profile sports events that a substantial and vocal group of students and alumni care about, schools have invested enormous resources in a vast array of semi-professionalized teams of little interest to anyone but the athletes involved. But even in the few high-profile events, the level of skill of the players (being generally mediocre by national standards) cannot be what makes attending fun or what fosters school spirit. It is, instead, the team's competitiveness within its conference, and in particular against traditional rivals (Harvard/Yale, Williams/Amherst). But being competitive doesn't require a quasi-professionalized sports team. It requires only that all the teams in a conference be fairly evenly matched.

Finally, and most importantly, there is presumably a limit to the percentage of its scarce resources a university can in good conscience spend in amusing even a substantial percentage of its students, faculty, and alumni. It is worth serious discussion whether allocating 10 to 25 percent of a school's admissions slots and millions of dollars a year for staff, recruiting, and construction and maintenance of elaborate sports facilities goes well beyond that limit.

Why Should We Care?

In arguing for reform, Shulman, Bowen, and their coauthors stress the "opportunity costs" of displacing academically more qualified students in favor of athletic recruits. Some of those costs are borne privately (by the students displaced, by faculty who lose the pleasure of teaching to a higher mean). Some costs are presumably borne by all of us, in the form of a sub-optimal use of society's scarce resources.

This argument for reform understandably makes many people uneasy. Without some better understanding of the value added by higher education, it is hard to be confident that mis-sorting students (judged by academic criteria) among what are all, after all, very good schools imposes any significant costs, private or public. In addition, the argument smacks of intellectual elitism, and features as the hidden "injured class" a population that, being already the most advantaged in society, doesn't make a particularly compelling victim: High-school academic superstars, overwhelmingly drawn from the upper echelons of society, who (statistically) will go on to have very successful lives whether they go to Princeton or their fifth- choice school.

But there are ways to describe the opportunity costs that make them seem more troubling. Consider the following: In the late 1980s, Asian students sued Harvard for racial discrimination, alleging that Asian applicants had a much lower chance of being admitted than white applicants, controlling for academic record. Harvard successfully defended the suit by showing that, while the plaintiffs were correct on the numbers, the disparity was solely a

product of athletic preferences and legacy preferences, in which categories Asians were greatly underrepresented. Legacy preferences have long been criticized for reproducing the racial makeup of previous generations of college students, which makeup was itself the product of deliberate racism. It is not clear why athletic preferences should be immune from criticism on similar grounds.

Or consider another group even more directly disadvantaged by athletic preferences: the physically disabled. While formally protected from discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the disabled are categorically barred, simply by virtue of their physical limitations, from competing for the 10 to 25 percent of the admissions slots set aside for athletes.

Or, finally, consider this. If elite universities and colleges are of a mind to take a chance on a group of high-school students who have not distinguished themselves academically to date by the standards of these highly selective schools, why not pick a group that has had the odds stacked against it from the start and whose full integration into institutions of power remains one of society's biggest challenges: the socioecomically disadvantaged and racial and ethnic minorities? Why take a chance on someone whose admission has the expected societal benefit of improving his or her team's win/loss from 18-16 to 20-14 and whose expected academic performance is significantly worse?

Of course, any decision to favor one group in the admissions process necessarily disadvantages all others. Merely pointing out the existence of substantial opportunity costs from athletic preferences does not resolve the question of what to do about them. But it does give us one more reason not to simply take on faith the conventional wisdom that elite schools somehow derive enormous intangible benefits from athletic preferences that justify those costs.

There is a second, hidden, cost of athletic preferences that, to my mind, is more serious: the incentives elite schools have created for academically ambitious children to turn themselves into semi-professional athletes, starting as early as elementary school. There is no population in the U.S. more exquisitely attuned to market cues than the ambitious middle- and upper-middle class parents of pre-college kids. In this environment, it would be naive to think that the singular preference given athletes in admission—common knowledge among high-school (indeed, even grade-school) students and their parents —hasn't profoundly affected the choices those students make about extracurricular activities all the way through secondary school. Data showing a huge spike in interest in serious high-school sports starting in 1989 seem to bear that out. So do the spate of recent news stories about parents' and students' efforts to exploit the "athletic edge" in admissions and the cottage industry of consultants and marketers that has sprung up to aid them.

Most high-school athletes will not be good enough to be recruited by colleges, let alone to go on to be professional athletes. But along the way, we will have shaped their priorities for a lifetime. From a societal perspective, it is hard to see this as a victory. By way of a thought experiment, imagine what behavioral changes elite universities could produce across America with lightning-quick speed if they announced that henceforth they were going to set aside 25 percent of their slots for (say) students who had reached x level of proficiency in science and math; or for really fine musicians, poets and artists; or for applicants who had mastered a second language; or for students who had taken two or more years off to do public service—provided that such applicants had board scores and grades no more than one standard deviation below the mean admit.

Recognizing the enormous power that elite universities' selection criteria exert on the development of the young doesn't tell us how that power should be used. But it does suggest that some soul-searching is in order within elite universities about whether they are currently exercising it in a fashion that is in the best long-term interests of society. This generation of college students will inherit a world with enormous problems. It is hard to believe that 40 years hence, looking back on how well we prepared them to face those problems, anyone will conclude that the skill these students under-invested in was football.

Is Radical Reform Possible?

My guess is that a proposal to return intercollegiate athletics to the people for whom it was designed—true scholar-athletes—would get support from a majority of students, faculty, alumni, and administrators at elite schools. The fact is, for schools outside Division IA, almost nothing that anyone (other than recruited athletes and coaches) really values in intercollegiate athletics would be lost, and quite a bit could be gained, in switching to a true amateur model, in which schools generously support sports teams for the benefit of all interested students. But inertia, interest-group politics, and the difficulty of collective action all combine to make it very hard to get from here to there.

The strongest defenders of the status quo—coaching staffs, recruited athletes, their families, and sports-mad alumni—all have a huge stake in its persistence. They are well informed about proposed changes, well organized, and typically overrepresented on the boards of trustees that must approve any change. In sharp contrast, the natural constituency for reform—faculty and the majority of students and alumni who are relatively indifferent to sports—are often ignorant about current admissions practices (thanks in part to university duplicity), dispersed, and with a low personal stake in change. As a consequence, any proposal to scale back the semi-professionalized model of athletics is met with a lopsided, and overwhelmingly hostile, public response. While one suspects most presidents of the Ivies and NESCAC members privately support radical reform, few have been willing to state that position publicly or go to the mat for it behind the scenes. This is hardly surprising, given the public reaction they (rightly) anticipate.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that a substantial percentage of students on these campuses in any given year were admitted as athletic recruits. Those students are not just statistical abstractions, like the hypothetical scholars who would have been admitted but for athletic preferences. They are everyone's roommates, friends, students, charges. That reality colors how everyone on campus views the status quo. It also (understandably) makes most critics of the current system reluctant to speak out publicly for reform.

There is, however, one reason for optimism here: the very irrationality of the existing system. The peculiar turn intercollegiate sports has taken over the past 40 years seems pretty clearly to be the product of historical accident and interest-group politics run amok, rather than the true preferences of the stakeholders in the enterprise or the deep-seated ideals of those with power. In such a case, change that seemed impossible *ex ante* can sometimes come quickly and relatively painlessly if only a critical mass of people are willing to demand it.

And change having come, the world it left behind, in which elite U.S. universities routinely selected 10 to 25 percent of their student body solely on the basis of athletic ability, could almost overnight seem as bewilderingly inexplicable as a world where 10 to 25 percent were chosen for their cooking skills.

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