

The Admissions Game: Recruiting Male Athletes and the Implications of Selection

It's the same for everybody in the conference. If one school can field a "nickel package," we all have to. Here we are with only 400 slots and I'm not just looking for a football player or a linebacker with scores that are respectable, I'm looking for a left outside linebacker who can blitz.

—Tom Parker, director of admissions at Amherst,
formerly director of admissions at Williams

IN A PINCH, a strong safety can be converted into a wide receiver. But a coach is presented with an entirely different situation when he has two very good 174-pound wrestlers and no one to step into the circle at 118 pounds. Although the firestorm over wrestling at Princeton began with the pressure to close a university-wide budget gap (and associated concerns over compliance with Title IX), the sport's unusual degree of specialization was an additional problem in the ongoing challenge it presented to an admissions office compelled to choose among a plethora of well-qualified candidates. This chapter describes the numbers of male athletes admitted to academically selective colleges and universities and how those students who play sports differ from their classmates.

At many of the schools in our study, it is not unusual to receive ten applications for every place in the entering class. Every spring, valedictorians with straight A averages, and applicants with stellar SAT scores who may have conducted original laboratory research or made a full-length documentary film, are rejected because there are only so many spots in a class. Because there are so many outstanding candidates, a place in the entering class at Wellesley, UNC-Chapel Hill, or Columbia is a scarce resource. In making these difficult selections, a school places its bets on certain students in the hope that in one way or another each student will contribute to the fulfillment of the institution's mission. It is when decisions are difficult that institutions and individuals demonstrate what really matters to them (as opposed to what they might *say*) really matters to

them). The admissions process is the key junction in creating not only the student body of the present but also the alumni/ae of the future.

Getting in:

"It's the way we give our children the very best chance for their future," said one Manhattan parent. "The child might be more relaxed if the pressure were off. But try being the only boy in a class of 20 who didn't get into the Harvards of the world. It's not only their future but their self-worth that's in jeopardy."¹

Although their plight will elicit little sympathy from the applicants who are on the receiving end of the thin or thick envelopes that they send, admissions officers and the administrators and trustees who stand behind them face enormous and conflicting pressures: alumni/ae who want their children, grandchildren, nieces, and grandnephews accepted; the local community, with whom the school can build good rapport by accepting students from nearby secondary schools; and the desire to create a class that benefits from many kinds of diversity—of opinion, social class, race, types of talent, and region of the country and of the world. Meanwhile, amidst the conflicting pressures, institutions set policies and make admissions decisions, knowing that every opportunity granted simultaneously represents many more opportunities lost.

Opportunity costs:

Economics textbooks define the *opportunity cost* of any decision or action as the value of the next best alternative that must be given up (the value of the "sacrificed alternative"). If someone who is working decides to go back to school full time, the costs that he or she faces will be not only the direct outlays for tuition and living expenses but also the opportunity costs of the decision—that is, the money that the individual would have earned while working full time. The tuition rate may be \$20,000 a year, but if the person had been earning \$30,000 per year, the true "cost" of returning to school is \$50,000 per year (assuming that living expenses would have had to be paid in either case). Understanding that every judgment concerning the allocation of a scarce resource has an opportunity cost is central to informed decision making.

RECRUITING ATHLETES

How should we think about the role that athletic talent plays in this competitive admissions environment, where every opportunity granted also represents an opportunity forgone? We begin by describing “the lay of the land”—the numbers of students who play intercollegiate sports and the degree to which their athletic skills contributed to their having been admitted. When we think about college athletics, we usually imagine a football stadium on a fall afternoon—and thus we tend to think that where the stadiums are to be found, there too are the college athletes. At the schools in this study, however, the vast majority of intercollegiate athletes are the less visible swimmers, soccer players, runners, and lacrosse players who populate up to 38 varsity teams at some schools.

An important matter of definition. We are counting as “athletes” all students who received one or more athletic awards—or “letters”—while in college. This is our objective definition of who is an athlete, and the underlying information, which was obtained from institutional records, is more reliable than aggregate data on numbers of “athletes” reported by schools. These aggregate data may involve double-counting—a student who plays two sports may be counted twice, which is not a problem with College and Beyond data—or reflect other inaccuracies. We distinguish these intercollegiate athletes both from students who played intramural or club sports and from those who played no sports at all. Although the great majority of athletes earned varsity letters, some earned freshman awards (especially in years before freshmen were eligible to play varsity sports) and some earned junior varsity awards. The criteria used to determine who received an award may well vary somewhat from sport to sport, school to school, and cohort to cohort. In general, it is best to assume that essentially all students who played on intercollegiate teams through the season received “awards.”

Throughout this study, we look at this broad array of athletes through four main lenses:

- *Type of sport.* Since one thing we want to know is how football players differ from golfers in SAT scores and their other attributes when they enter college, we divide male athletes into two broad categories: those who play the High Profile sports of football, basketball, and hockey, and those who play all other sports.² In our standard “scorecard” format (used extensively in the scorecards in Appendix A to

summarize data), we compare both groups of athletes with all other students, whom we call "students at large." At times, we also distinguish two subsets of students at large: those who played high school sports but did not play sports in college and those who participated extensively in time-intensive extracurricular activities other than athletics.

- *Level of competition.* We group those athletes who played each type of sport according to whether they played in Division IA public universities, Division IA private universities, Division IAA universities (Ivies), Division III coed liberal arts colleges, and, when we come to the data concerning women (beginning in Chapter 6), Division III women's colleges. (The list of all participating institutions, grouped by division, is given in the Preface.)
- *Student "generation" or year of matriculation.* The third lens we use is time, to see whether differences in qualifications and other attributes have changed between the cohorts who entered college in the fall of 1951, the fall of 1976, and the fall of 1989.
- *Gender.* A crucial topic is the growth in the number of women's teams and in the ways in which women athletes do and do not share the attributes of their male counterparts. It is confusing, however, to move back and forth constantly between consideration of men's and women's teams at each stage of the discussion; a clearer picture emerges when we first examine the admission of male athletes and then present a comparative analysis for the women, beginning in Chapter 6.

Numbers of Male Athletes

The percentage of male students in the '89 entering cohort who earned athletic awards ranged from 5 percent at the Division IA public universities and 9 percent at the Division IA private universities to 27 percent at the Ivy League schools and 32 percent at the Division III coed liberal arts colleges (Figure 2.1).³ Even more recent data from the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) filings show that in 1997–98 the absolute number of men playing intercollegiate sports at an illustrative set of these schools was 209 at Tulane, 305 at Denison, 362 at the University of Michigan, 371 at both Duke and Columbia, 411 at Williams, 460 at Stanford, and 537 at Princeton (Table 2.1). These numbers represent the total number of athletes on campus (from four or five classes) as opposed to the single-year cohorts that we are studying.⁴ The six sports that enjoyed varsity status at all eight of these schools were football, basketball, baseball, track, golf, and tennis. Swimming was a varsity sport at all but one school,

but then the pattern varies. Ice hockey was offered at three schools; fencing, rowing, and lacrosse at four; wrestling at six; squash, volleyball, and water polo at two; and skiing at only one. Of course, many students at large also play sports at schools where intramural programs and club sports are extremely popular activities. At Denison University, for example, 87 percent of all students compete at either the varsity, club varsity, or intramural level, and the comparable percentage at Notre Dame is 85 percent.

We explore the influence of athletes on campus ethos later in the chapter. But we take note here of a fact that may strike some readers as both surprising and ironic: at many of the schools that emphasize big-time sports, the number of intercollegiate athletes tends to be small in relation to the size of the student body. On the other hand, where there is less emphasis on the highly visible big-time sports, the number of athletes playing on intercollegiate teams is often much larger, certainly in relation to the size of the student body and sometimes in absolute terms as well. At Williams, for example, approximately 40 percent of the undergraduate men play on an intercollegiate team, as contrasted with approximately 3 percent at Michigan. At schools such as Williams, the influence of the athletes on the makeup of the class is likely to be much more consequential than at a very large institution, where the athletes constitute

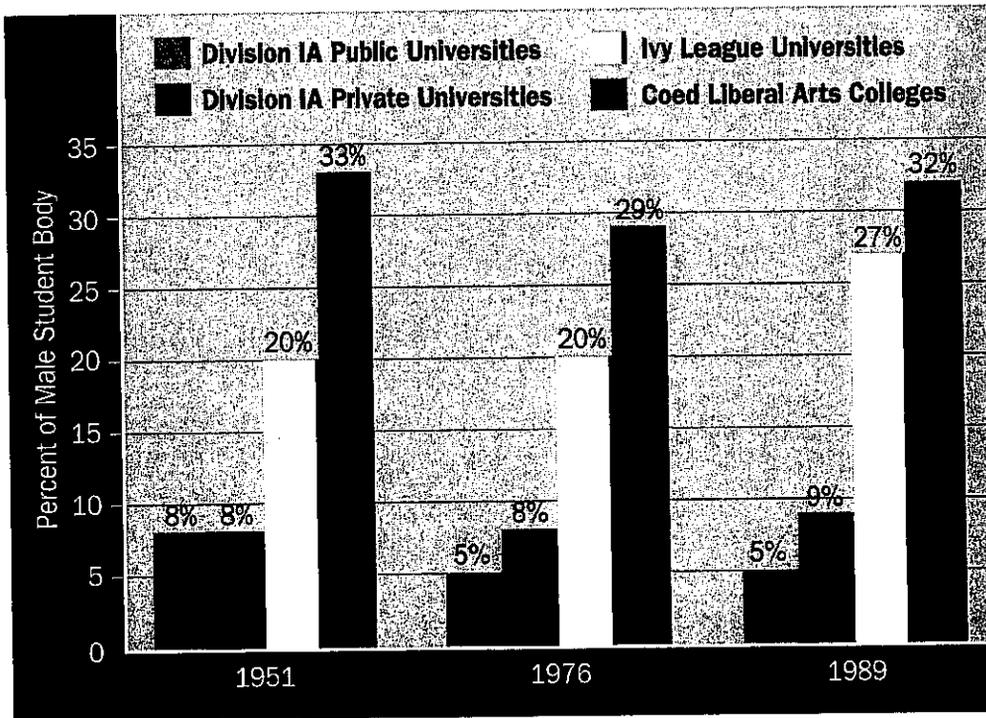


Figure 2.1. Athletes as a Percent of All Male Students (by Cohort and Division)
 Source: College and Beyond (see Scorecard 2.1).

TABLE 2.1
Intercollegiate Athletes by Sport, 1997-98 (Selected Schools, Male Only)

	University of Michigan	Stanford	Duke	Tulane	Columbia	Princeton	Denison	Williams
Baseball	42	36	25	34	23	31	30	25
Basketball	16	13	15	18	16	15	22	20
Fencing	—	17	14	—	23	20	—	—
Football	121	98	98	105	70	109	68	75
Golf	22	17	11	13	9	8	13	12
Gymnastics	16	11	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ice hockey	27	—	—	—	—	26	—	25
Lacrosse	—	—	41	—	—	46	46	30
Rowing	—	49	—	—	43	41	—	22
Sailing	—	12	—	—	—	—	—	—
Skiing	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	16
Soccer	—	23	24	—	28	22	28	27
Squash	—	—	—	—	—	19	—	13
Swimming	28	26	20	—	29	30	41	31
Tennis	9	13	11	22	10	12	12	17
Track-cross-country	47	71	93	17	102	106	45	80
Volleyball	—	16	—	—	—	15	—	—
Water polo	—	27	—	—	—	17	—	—
Wrestling	34	31	19	—	18	20	—	18
Total	362	460	371	209	371	537	305	411
As percent of all men	3	14	11	7	14	22	31	40
Number of teams	10	15	11	6	11	16	9	14
Lower Profile athletes	225	349	258	86	286	413	215	316

Source: Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act filings, 1997-98.

only a tiny fraction of the total student body. This is an extremely important point, to which we will return many times.

We see from Figure 2.1 that the overall college athlete percentages have remained consistent over time. The '51 entering cohorts look very much like the '89 cohorts in this regard. These percentages have changed the most in the Ivies, with the athletes increasing from 20 percent of the male student body in both the '51 and '76 cohorts to 27 percent in the '89 cohort (a change due entirely to a marked increase in the relative number of athletes in the Lower Profile sports). Otherwise, the proportions of award-winners in the classes have been remarkably steady over time. One might be tempted to conclude that little has changed, that the presence of athletes in the student body is no different today than it was in the mid-1950s.

But are the athletes playing on intercollegiate teams today really the same as their predecessors in the 1950s? Are today's athletes as representative of their classes as the athletes of the 1950s? Suppose, for example, that in 1951 19 percent of students who had already been accepted to academically selective colleges *ended up* playing sports and earning letters, whereas more recently 19 percent of the class at these same schools was *sought out* to come to the school to play sports; in this case, similar percentages would mask substantial underlying differences. To what extent, if at all, is this example correct? The key questions are both the degree to which athletes are actively recruited and the ways in which they differ from their classmates who do not play college sports—and whether the answers to these questions have changed over time.

We were reminded in the previous chapter that college football has been taken seriously by a broad public since the late 1800s. It would be naïve to believe that the teams that filled stadiums in the early 1950s and prompted the first television contracts were dependent for players on whoever showed up on the first day of school and decided to play. Indeed, the 1929 Carnegie report noted that "the recruiting of American college athletes, be it active or passive, professional or non-professional, has reached the proportions of nationwide commerce."⁵ Still, recruiting may have taken on a different meaning in the context of the highly competitive admissions processes of recent years.

Patterns of Recruitment

If you coach at Bates College and know that next year you are going to play Colby College in lacrosse on April 12th, you will want to be sure that there are some good lacrosse players in your student body. Duffy Daugherty, when he was head football coach at Michigan State, is reputed to

have said, "Sure, I believe in need-based financial aid. If I need a nose tackle, I get one!" Although there may be a natural process by which players simply show up to play on teams, the coaches and the administrators who oversee college sports programs are not likely to be willing to depend on the luck of the draw. Recruitment can range from paying special attention to a prospective athlete in the application process to providing all-expenses-paid trips to campus for an athlete. Recruitment may play a substantial role in determining a candidate's chance of admission, or it may play only a very minor role.

The number of recruited athletes is directly related to the rules of the game (as stipulated by the NCAA), but in ways that some may find surprising. The presence of athletic scholarships allows Division IA schools to act much more efficiently in admitting football players and (to varying degrees) other athletes than schools without athletic scholarships. The NCAA limits the total number of scholarships in football to 85 and caps the number of first-year awards in football at 25. The traditional admissions process plays less of a role in situations in which big-time sports are considered major investments and in which (within the NCAA guidelines) the coaches are generally able to get the players they want. Ironically, the absence of athletic scholarships at the Ivy League schools and at liberal arts colleges can lead these schools to recruit *larger* numbers of athletes than they really need to fill their rosters. Although the big-time schools may be more willing to accept substantially lower academic qualifications and to pay scholarship money, the apparently more "innocent" levels of play may involve the recruitment of *many more* athletes, and not simply because these schools often field larger numbers of teams. This simple but basic point was, we are told, a revelation when communicated to one board of trustees.

The lack of scholarships in effect requires schools to "over-recruit" in order to guarantee sufficient numbers of goalies, relief pitchers, and long-snappers. In the Ivy League, if your top quarterback chooses to spend the autumn mountain biking in Hanover or becomes dazzled by the lights of Broadway and quits the team, there is no major financial disincentive for him, since financial aid is not contingent on the student's willingness to keep playing. As a consequence, what one of our commentators called "walk-off" attrition is a much more serious concern for coaches at non-scholarship schools than for coaches in big-time programs (although of course they too lose athletes, sometimes because of decisions to embark on professional careers before graduating). So, ironically, the less "serious" Ivy League allots 35 freshman slots a year to football players—which implies a hypothetical total of 140 recruited football players in college at any one time. For Columbia, where there are only 630 undergraduate men in each class, this 35-person limit (which, if the coaches prevail, is

almost always reached) ensures that 6 percent of the freshman men will be football players. Hence, even the high proportions of award winners in the Ivy League and at the Division III coed liberal arts colleges shown in Figure 2.1 may well understate the total number who were recruited by these groups of schools.

With these different contexts in mind, we can try to determine the degree to which the percentage of students playing intercollegiate sports reflects the predilections of students who were accepted for other reasons by Swarthmore or Penn or Duke, and to what degree it reveals the number of places in the entering class that were set aside for the purpose of filling rosters.

Recruiting practices in the early 1950s are known only from anecdotal evidence. In general, it appears that good high school football players, in particular, were recruited by a wide variety of schools. One future collegiate star running back from that era recalls having been encouraged by a local alumnus to think about the school that he ended up attending, and also having been contacted by alumni from a number of other schools. One out-of-state school actually sent a representative to visit him at his home (a very rare occurrence in those days). High school coaches often screened approaches from colleges and not infrequently steered players to one school or another. Several athletes from the 1950s with whom we spoke recall their high school coaches as especially trusted advisors and friends. Apart from football, recruiting in even this relatively relaxed mode was uncommon. A tennis player at a Division III coed liberal arts college in the 1950s recalls having taken the initiative in contacting the coach of his sport and having being encouraged to apply and then to come, but that was the extent of it. A one-time captain of the tennis team at another school in our study was, in his words, "definitely" not recruited; he never met his future varsity coach until he was on campus. In this broadly defined group of sports and schools, the application process in the 1950s was generally initiated by the prospective student who had decided, first, that he wanted to go to the school in question and, second, that he wanted to continue playing sports.⁶

In the 1960s, top tier athletes were ever more actively—and nationally—recruited by colleges and universities at all levels of competition. Bob Blackmun at Dartmouth is reported to have begun the first highly organized national recruiting program for football in the Ivy League, and by the late 1960s the "Blackmun system" had spread to other major sports. By the time the '76 cohort entered the schools in this study, there is evidence that recruiting had become much more important, in the High Profile sports especially, but in other sports as well. The most obvious way of gauging whether students were recruited to play sports is simply to ask them. As part of the Cooperative Institutional Research

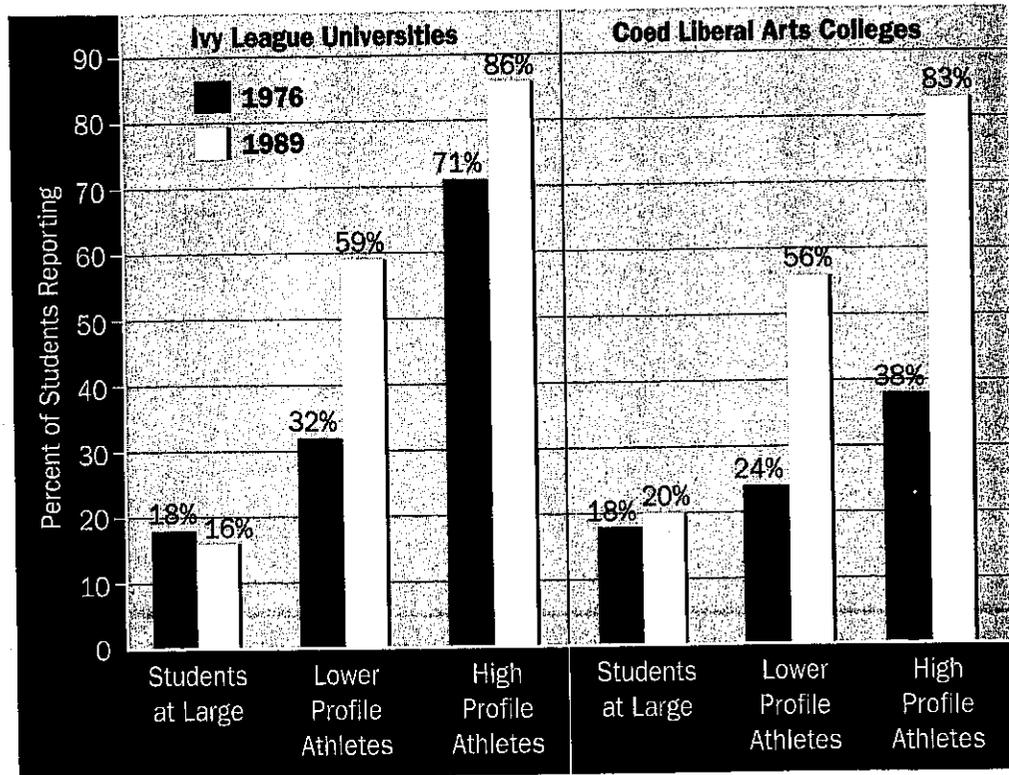


Figure 2.2. Percent of Students Reporting that Being "Recruited" Was a "Very Important" Reason for Choosing This Specific College (by Athlete Status and Cohort, at Ivy League Universities and Coed Liberal Arts Colleges, Male Only)
 Source: College and Beyond (see Scorecard 2.2).

program (CIRP) survey that many students answered when enrolled in college in '76 and '89, incoming freshmen were asked to say whether being recruited by a representative of the school played an important role in their choosing to attend that college. These numbers were high for athletes in the '76 entering cohort (Figure 2.2 and Scorecard 2.2)—71 percent for High Profile athletes in the Ivy League and 38 percent for those at the liberal arts colleges, as compared with 18 percent for students at large in both sectors.⁷ Even so, these figures are probably underestimates because the CIRP questionnaire did not ask specifically about athletics.

By 1989, the CIRP questionnaire had been changed to add a question about athletic recruitment, and 73 percent of those who earned athletic awards in college now reported that being recruited had played a role in their choosing which college to attend; in contrast, only 13 percent of students at large reported that they had been recruited (sector composite in Scorecard 2.2, bottom panel). The percent-recruited figure is much

higher for athletes who played High Profile sports and in fact was 86 percent in the Ivies and 83 percent at the Division III coed liberal arts colleges. Even in the Lower Profile sports, nearly 60 percent of the award winners in the '89 cohort in the Ivies and well over 50 percent of those in the liberal arts colleges said that they had been recruited; the corresponding figures for Lower Profile athletes in the Division IA schools would almost certainly be far higher. These percentages suggest that the days of the "walk-on," especially but not only in the High Profile sports and the big-time programs, may be numbered—if they have not already disappeared. A major consequence of this trend is that coaches have come to play a far more significant role in the admissions process.

The process of athletic recruitment has become highly complex. Coaches play a critically important role by contacting attractive prospects directly and by having their assistants attend competitions, camps, tournaments, and other events to identify promising candidates. Alumni, high school coaches, and others refer high school athletes to coaches and alert the coaches to the presence of promising candidates at particular secondary schools. Prospective college athletes, or their parents, frequently contact coaches directly, in part because such contact may increase the odds of being admitted. (As we show later in this chapter, applicants on a coach's preferred list have a much better chance of surviving the highly competitive admissions process than do other students.) Because pre-collegiate records are now kept so meticulously, coaches of Lower Profile sports, as well as coaches of the High Profile teams, are almost certain to know a great deal about the competitive success of, say, a swimmer, a runner, or a tennis player at the time of the college application process. We are told that on occasion an entirely unheralded player still appears and ends up making a team, but this is a less and less frequent occurrence. Because of the extensive information available on precollegiate athletic achievement, and the natural desire of the prospective athlete to ensure that the coach knows about him or her, the odds that someone unknown to the coach would appear on campus, compete successfully for a spot on a team, and earn a varsity letter are, in the words of one admissions dean, "essentially zero."

The main exception to this generalization, the dean added, is crew. Because so few high schools have rowing programs, the crew teams welcome promising students—sometimes, we are told, going so far as to pick them out of registration lines. "Crew is the last amateur sport," the dean went on to say, in the sense that a student can arrive as a freshman, never having rowed, and conceivably end up as an Olympic rower—although this is far less likely to be true in the specialized sport of "lightweight" crew. In sharp contrast, one tennis coach at a non-scholarship school could remember only three top varsity tennis players on his teams over the past

15 years who had not been recruited. A basketball coach said that, over the past 19 years, he could not think of a single player who had contributed substantially to the success of the team who was unknown to the coaches at the time of admission.

THE ATHLETIC "ADVANTAGE" IN ADMISSIONS

There is, we believe, a more reliable way of measuring the changes that have occurred since 1976 in the emphasis given to athletic recruitment. Instead of asking individual students what factors affected their enrollment decisions (an inevitably subjective and error-prone approach), or asking coaches or even deans of admissions, we can compare the actual admissions probabilities for four groups of students *after controlling for differences in their SAT scores*: a base group of students at large, legacies, minority students from underrepresented groups, and athletes recruited by coaches. This exercise requires having full data on all applicants, not just those who were accepted. Fortunately, thanks to the foresight of a dedicated archivist, we have a complete compilation of such data for one of the non-scholarship schools in our study. This school is representative of that part of the College and Beyond universe in which athletics matters, but where the coach's word is not the last word in admissions.⁸

The story told in Figure 2.3 is dramatic. In the '76 entering cohort, a recruited athlete had a 23 percent better chance of being admitted than a student at large, after adjusting for differences in SAT scores; in that same cohort, legacies had an admissions advantage of 20 percent over non-legacies, and minority students had a 49 percent better chance of being admitted than a white student with comparable SAT scores.⁹ In the '89 admissions cohort, the advantage enjoyed by the recruited athlete was modestly higher than it had been in '76 (30 percent versus 23 percent), the legacy advantage was also up slightly, and the admissions advantage of minority students was much lower than it had been in '76—and in fact was now the smallest of the three "advantages." Most striking of all are the results for the '99 cohort: in this group, the recruited athletes had an admissions advantage of 48 percent—substantially more than the degree of advantage enjoyed by legacies and minority students. Data for one other non-scholarship school for which we have information concerning all applicants in the '89 cohort (including all recruited athletes) allow us to confirm the '89 part of the picture shown in Figure 2.3. At this second school, the admissions advantage enjoyed by recruited athletes in the '89 cohort was even greater than at the first school, and it was much greater than the advantage enjoyed by legacies and minority students. (The marked decline over these three cohorts in the admissions advantage of

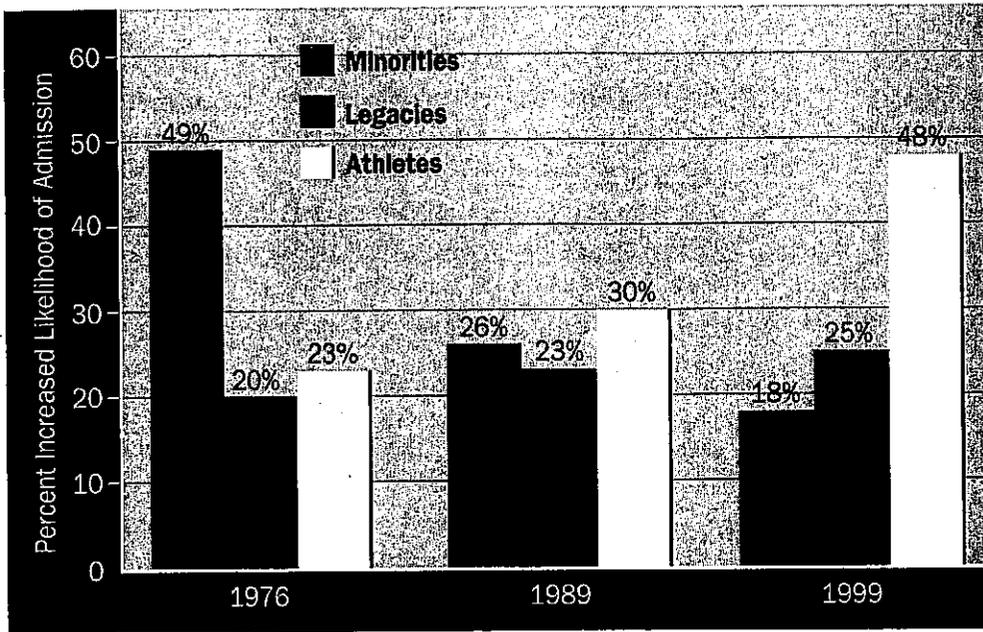


Figure 2.3. Adjusted Admissions Advantage at a Representative Non-Scholarship School, Controlling for Differences in SAT Scores (1976, 1989, and 1999, Male Only)

minority students is presumably due in large part to the continuing improvements in the qualifications of those who apply. In the epilogue to Chapter 3, we say more about similarities and differences in the recruitment of athletes and the enrollment of minority students.)

These data illustrate clearly the special attention given to athletes in today's admissions process. When race is considered as a factor in admissions, emotions run high and lawsuits are filed. And yet black and Hispanic students make up, on average, roughly 10 to 15 percent of the population at these selective schools. Admitting legacies also earns the ire of some who complain that "insider affirmative action" has no place in a democratic country. There are obvious differences in the rationale for giving special attention to members of these three groups, but, at a minimum, looking at them side by side causes us to reflect on the mission of the college or university as it is reflected in the admissions process.

In the case of athletic recruitment, there are two primary justifications. As we noted in Chapter 1, building strong athletic teams by recruiting top performers may be regarded as a good direct investment by the institution. By fueling an enterprise that potentially provides a return through gate revenues, community relations, increased fundraising, and name recognition ("image"), vigorous athletic recruitment may increase the

resources available to support other activities. The second principal justification for recruiting athletes is that their athletic talent is considered a proxy for other skills and attributes that serve the institution's core educational mission. This second line of argument assumes that intercollegiate athletes have personal qualities (values, strengths, power) that will distinguish them when the games of sports end and the game of life begins. Keeping in mind these two very different justifications (support of the institution versus being part of the core educational mission) will help us assess the degree to which sports programs are playing the role that they are expected to play at selective colleges and universities.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SELECTION

As we noted earlier, opportunity cost is one central concept in social science that must be considered at every step along the way in assessing the investments made by schools in their athletic programs. Distinguishing "selection effects" from "treatment effects" is a second concept of equivalent importance, if the subjects of an experiment are not chosen at random. *If we hope to learn anything about the effect that playing college sports has on those who play, it is essential to take account of the differences between intercollegiate athletes and their classmates that already existed when these students were admitted, and to disentangle, as best one can, these selection effects from the treatment effects that are produced by playing sports at the collegiate level. Examples abound as to why it is so important to distinguish "selection" effects from "treatment" effects.*

"Selection" effects distinguished from "treatment" effects:

The photographs of well-coifed men and women that hang in the windows of many hairdressers' storefronts provide an excellent example of why it is important to recognize differences among subjects at the beginning of an experiment. In every case, the people look beautiful. The message that we as potential customers are receiving from these photographs is "Come in here, and you too will leave looking beautiful." But if, alas, we are far from beautiful when we walk in the door, the chances are that we will not be beautiful when we leave. We may look better—the "treatment" may have a positive effect—but we cannot hope for the outcomes intimated by the alluring photos wherein inputs (beautiful people with great hair) were jumbled together with "treatment" (haircuts).

In educating students, schools seek to have a substantive impact on those who matriculate. To gauge such impact—both within the classroom and also through the other experiences that students have—we need to understand students' academic preparation and other attributes when they entered college. Whether the objective is to prepare students for careers, for informed citizenship, to assume leadership roles, to embody certain values, or simply to develop students' academic capacity, achievement of that objective should be judged in terms of the degree of change that occurred during college. If students were randomly assigned to schools, we could start with freshman year and take up the investigation. But since students—and especially the students who play sports—are far from randomly selected, we need to start by learning as much as we can about their differences at the time they were admitted, so that we can accurately gauge how much of what we see later was already evident from the beginning.

DIFFERENCES IN ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

Setting to one side their athletic prowess, perhaps the most important respect in which athletes are thought to differ from other students is in how well prepared they are academically before entering college. One of the most widely circulated myths about college athletics is the image of the "dumb jock," admitted on the basis of his ability to tackle an opposing running back rather than to do mathematics or to hold forth on literature. To test this myth empirically, we must be much more specific. Is the myth of the less-well-prepared athlete truer at some levels of competition than at others? Have the Ivies and the Division III coed liberal arts colleges escaped the perceived problems of the universities with big-time athletic programs? Is the myth more accurate in recent cohorts than it was in earlier eras? And, finally, are there marked differences in the academic credentials of those who play different types of sports?

'89 Cohort Comparisons

We start out by comparing the SAT scores of those athletes in the '89 entering cohorts who went on to play both the High Profile sports (football, basketball, and hockey) and the Lower Profile sports with the SAT scores of their classmates (students at large). The general pattern is the same in all four sets of schools depicted in Figure 2.4:

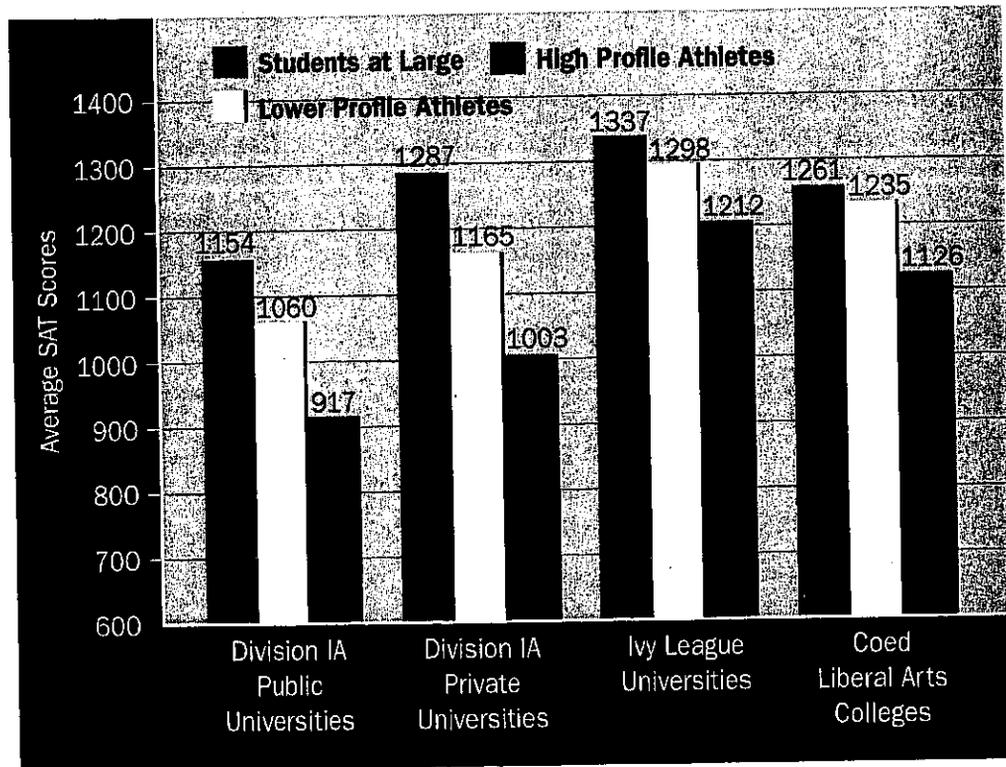


Figure 2.4. Average SAT Scores by Athlete Status and Division (1989 Cohort, Male Only)

Source: College and Beyond (see Scorecard 2.3).

- The gaps in average SAT scores between students at large and High Profile athletes are very large in every set of schools, and especially at those places that operate big-time programs. The largest gap in scores (284 points) is at the Division IA private universities, and this is hardly surprising. These schools recruit athletes who can play football and basketball at the most demanding level of play while simultaneously attracting some of the most academically outstanding students in the country.
- Consistent with the data presented earlier in the chapter on the presence of a large “advantage” for athletes in general in the admissions process, we find that those playing the Lower Profile sports also had lower average SAT scores than students at large (with the gaps ranging from roughly 100 to 120 points at the Division IA level and from 25 to 40 points in the Division III coed liberal arts colleges and Ivy League schools).

The Growth in the Test Score Gap

How new are these patterns? We have reliable data for the '51 cohort for only the Ivy League and the Division III coed liberal arts colleges. Even in that early year and in these schools with less intensive athletic programs, High Profile athletes had lower SAT scores than did students at large. So, the existence of differences in academic preparation between athletes and other students is not a new phenomenon; it was also present in the 1950s. But the differences were much smaller then. The gaps in SAT scores have grown over time, especially in the High Profile sports: they were larger in the '76 cohort than they were in '51 in both the Ivies and the Division III coed liberal arts colleges; and they were appreciably larger in the '89 cohorts than in the '76 cohorts in the Division IA public universities, the Division IA private universities, and the Division III coed liberal arts colleges (Figure 2.5). Only in the Ivies did the gap in scores between students at large and the athletes playing High Profile sports decline between the '76 and '89 cohorts—and this was an “against-

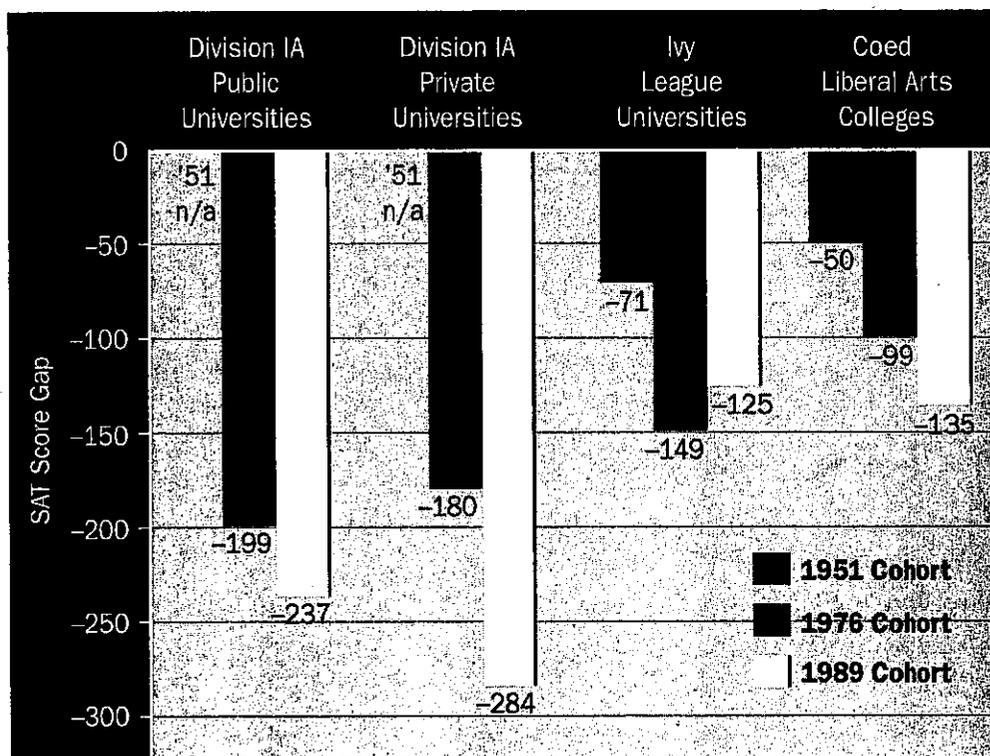


Figure 2.5. High Profile Athlete SAT Divergence from Students at Large (by Cohort and Division, Male Only)

Source: College and Beyond.

the-grain" shift that was a direct result of a league-wide policy decision (discussed in Chapter 1 and later in this chapter).

This pattern should be viewed in the context of the steadily increasing competition for admission to all of these schools. Between 1951 and 1976, a sea change occurred in what admission to a selective college or university meant. "Democratization," the enrollment of women and minorities, greater emphasis on the desirability of attending a school with a strong academic reputation, and the "nationalization" of the application process fundamentally changed the rules of admission—including the academic criteria that helped determine who made it to campus. In the Ivies, the average SAT score of students at large increased by 114 points between 1951 and 1976. By 1976, the private universities that make up the Division IA group had become very strong academically. Stanford, Duke, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Vanderbilt, Tulane, and Rice were recruiting a much more academically talented group of students than they had in earlier days. The average SAT score of students at large was 1215—high by national standards although still 84 points below the average for the Ivies and 13 points below the average for the Division III coed liberal arts colleges. The academic selectivity of the schools in each of these divisions continued to increase between the '76 and '89 cohorts, and it is the ever-higher scores of the students at large that are primarily responsible for the continued widening in the gaps in academic preparation between the students at large and the High Profile athletes, whose absolute SAT scores declined slightly in '76 and '89 (Scorecard 2.3).

Only in the Ivies did the SAT scores of the High Profile athletes rise more rapidly between '76 and '89 than the SAT scores of the students at large (causing the gap in SAT scores to decline from 149 to 125 points over the same interval that it rose by over 100 points in the Division IA private universities and more modestly in the Division IA public universities and the Division III coed liberal arts colleges). The stated goal of the Ivy League since its inception had been to enroll athletes who were "representative" of the student body at large, and, in the early 1980s, it became more and more evident that action was required if these were not to be empty words. After much discussion, the Ivy League presidents decided to regulate the degree to which the academic credentials of athletes could vary from those of their peers at the institution. Acting together, the presidents adopted a measuring rod called the Academic Index, which was plainly responsible for the reduction in the SAT score gap that is so visible in Figure 2.5. In the 13 years between 1976 and 1989, the average SATs of football, basketball, and hockey players in the Ivy League increased from 1150 to 1212—a gain of 62 points.

The experiences of the liberal arts colleges offer an interesting counterpoint. As institutions, they too became appreciably more selective

over the course of the 1980s, but the mean score of their football, hockey, and basketball players actually declined by 3 points over this period. So, while the test score gap in the Ivy League had narrowed to 125 points (from 149 in the '76 cohort), it widened in the liberal arts colleges from 99 to 135 points. In the next chapter we answer the obvious question of whether these differences in test score gaps affected the actual academic performance of the athletes versus the performance of their classmates.¹⁰

The Less Visible Sports

In the 1950s, in both the Ivy League schools and the liberal arts colleges, the average test scores of students who played the Lower Profile sports were only about 20 points lower than the average test scores of their classmates. By the time of the '89 cohort, the situation had changed markedly (Figures 2.6a-d). In fact, now only a small number of Lower Profile teams fell inside the 20 to 30 point range: four in the Ivies, four in the liberal arts colleges, five in the Division IA private universities, and two in the Division IA public universities. The sports that most frequently record average SAT scores that are more or less comparable to the general standard for the school are crew, squash, fencing, golf, and swimming (See Appendix Table B.2.1).¹¹ What is most surprising is the size of the test score gap that has emerged in a sport like tennis: in 1989, tennis had the second largest gap of *any* sport in the liberal arts colleges (-143 points, second only to football) and gaps of more than 100 points in both the Ivies and the Division IA private universities. None of these gaps is of course nearly as large as those characteristic of basketball and football (which are in the -300-point range in the Division IA private universities), but the gaps in these Lower Profile sports certainly appear to be moving in the same general direction.¹²

A Broader Perspective

At selective colleges and universities, questions of academic preparation have little to do with having enough brainpower to "survive" college. The mean SAT scores of male athletes at the Division III coed liberal arts colleges and Ivy League universities in the study were above the 80th percentile of all male test-takers nationally; the mean scores of athletes at the Division IA private and public universities were above the 70th percentile and the 55th percentile, respectively.¹³ The athletes at these selective schools are clearly smart people. Nonetheless, there are differences in pre-collegiate academic preparation between athletes and their class-

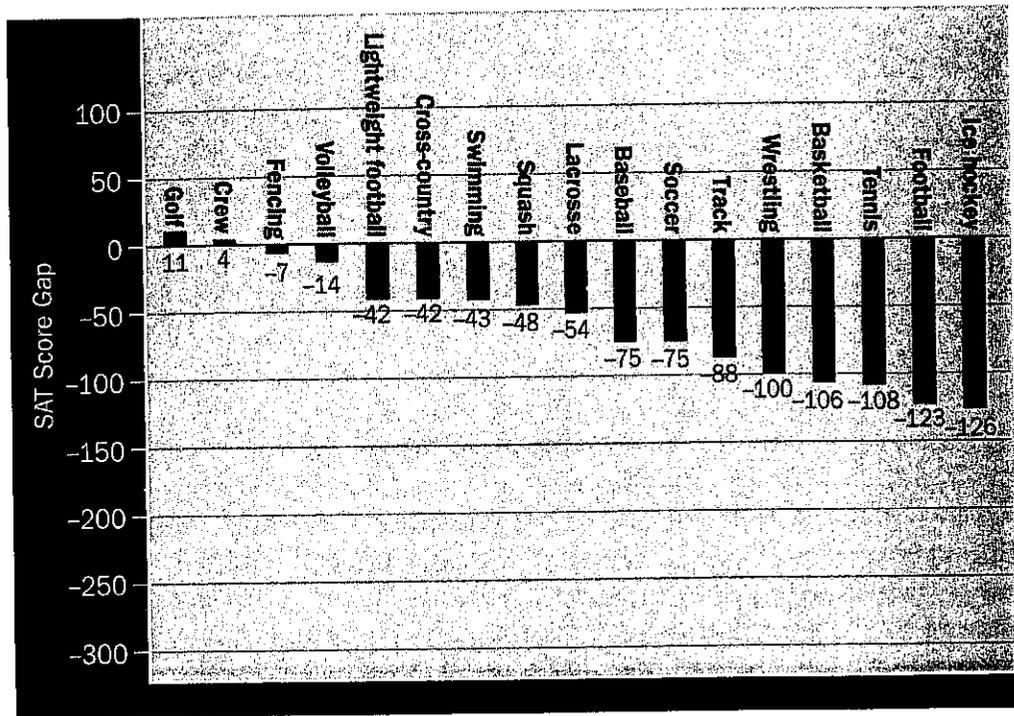


Figure 2.6a. 1989 Ivy League Athlete SAT Divergence from Students at Large (by Sport, Male Only)

Source: College and Beyond.

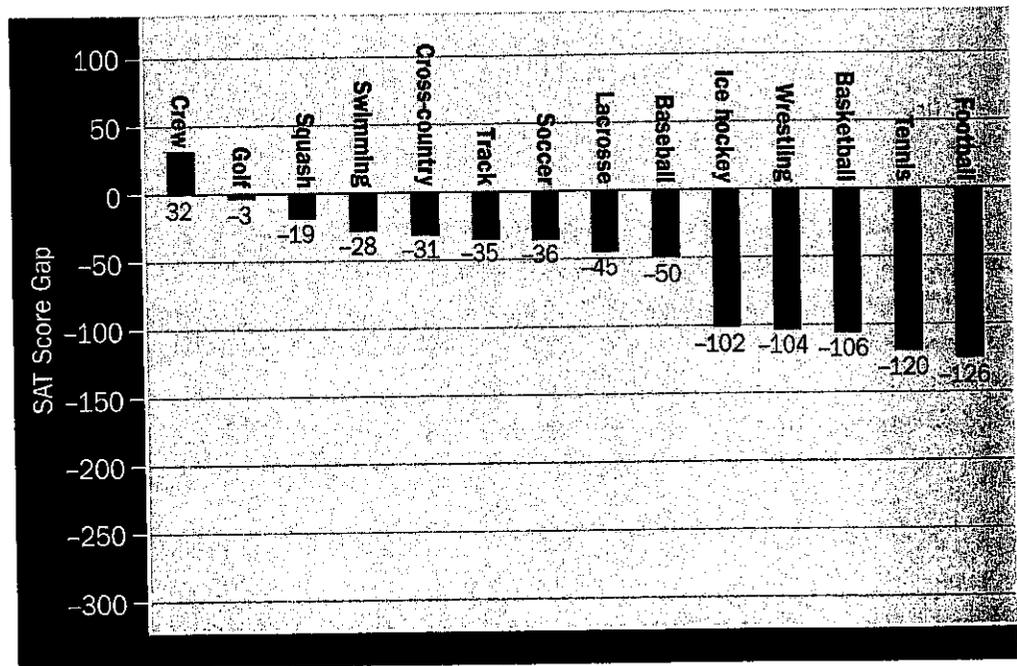


Figure 2.6b. 1989 Division III Athlete SAT Divergence from Students at Large (by Sport, Male Only)

Source: College and Beyond.

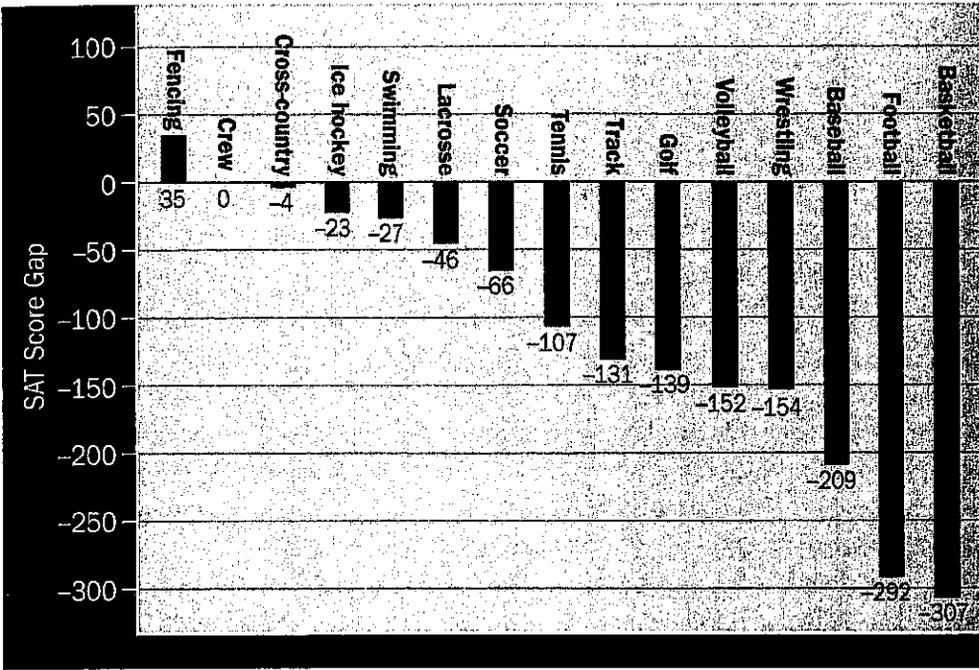


Figure 2.6c. 1989 Division IA Private Athlete SAT Divergence from Students at Large (by Sport, Male Only)
 Source: College and Beyond.

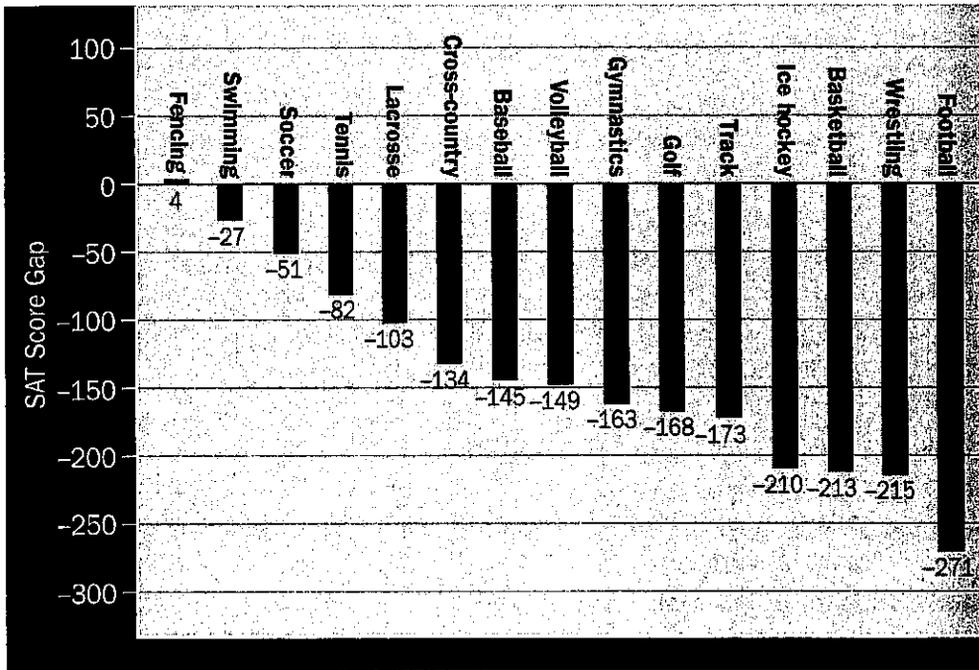


Figure 2.6d. 1989 Division IA Public Athlete SAT Divergence from Students at Large (by Sport, Male Only)
 Source: College and Beyond.

mates, and these differences have generally become much more pronounced over time. These patterns of difference in academic preparation are clear *at every level of play and in sports of many kinds, not simply in the High Profile programs at the Division IA schools.*

DIVERSITY

Athletes differ from their classmates not only in academic preparation but also in backgrounds, goals, and outlook on the world. One place where the stated aims of the admissions process at selective schools overlap naturally with the lore of college sports is in the building of a diverse student body. Colleges and universities that can choose from among a panoply of valedictorians and high-scoring test-takers have long understood that students learn from one another, and that a monolithic student body makes it harder for students to transcend the limits of the world that they already know. Moreover, colleges and universities also have defined their mission, since their earliest days, to include providing opportunity for social mobility and training those who will provide leadership for all segments of society.

Athletics and Socioeconomic Status

First-generation college-goers are becoming an increasingly rare presence on the campuses of selective colleges. This is testimony both to the facts of demographic change in America (many more parents are now college graduates) and to how hard college-educated parents work to push their offspring upward and onward. The percentage of all C&B students with a father who had a college degree (or an advanced degree) rose from 46 percent for the '51 cohort to 64 percent and 75 percent in the '76 and '89 cohorts respectively (Scorecard 2.4).

As the backgrounds of students at large have become more advantaged, students playing the High Profile sports of football, basketball, and hockey have become a more important source of socioeconomic diversity. In the '89 entering cohort, students playing these sports were far less likely than their classmates to come from families with fathers who were college graduates (Figure 2.7). This clear pattern holds at every level of play, even though it is most pronounced at the Division IA schools.¹⁴ Coaches and other advocates of athletic recruiting are right in noting that recruiting those who play High Profile sports helps provide educational opportunity for those who have been less advantaged.

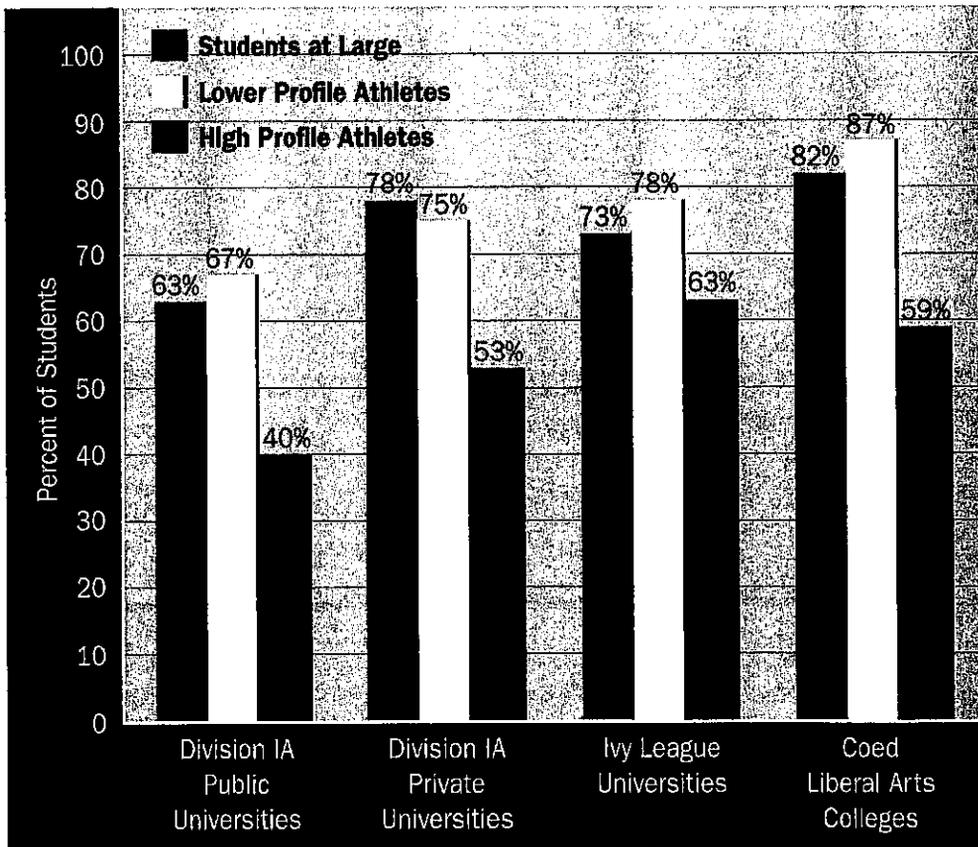


Figure 2.7. Percent of Students with a Father Who Has a Bachelor's Degree or Higher (by Athlete Status and Division, 1989 Cohort, Male Only)

Source: College and Beyond (see Scorecard 2.4).

The same claim cannot be made, however, on behalf of those athletes who play the Lower Profile sports. If anything, the typical student who plays lacrosse, swims, or plays soccer is somewhat more likely than the student at large—never mind the football player—to have come from an advantaged background (Figure 2.7). The same pattern is found when the educational attainment of mothers is examined and when we compare the numbers of students who attended private secondary schools.

Magnitudes matter, and it is interesting to ask how the percentage of all students attending the various types of schools from different socioeconomic backgrounds would change if there were no recruitment of athletes (or if athletes came from the same backgrounds as all other students). In the '89 cohort, the percentage of all students whose fathers had a B.A. or an advanced degree would not have changed at all at the Division IA public universities or at the Ivies, while at the Division IA private universities and at the Division III coed liberal arts colleges it would

have risen 1 percentage point (from 77 to 78 percent and from 81 to 82 percent, respectively). The overall impact of athletes on socioeconomic status is less than one might have expected it to be because of (1) the generally high socioeconomic status of those who play Lower Profile sports and (2) the *relatively* small number of High Profile athletes, especially in the Division IA schools.

The Enrollment of African Americans

One of the myths associated with college sports is that athletics provides a particularly attractive pathway for minority students, and especially black students, to escape from poverty. When a school makes an admissions decision, it not only offers an opportunity to an individual, it also sends a signal to others, including students who have not even applied. Through this signaling effect, the school is saying, in effect, "here is what we value." What message concerning race have schools been sending through their athletics programs, and what have been the direct and indirect effects?

There has been a great deal of debate about the role of sports in this country's minority communities. At one end of the spectrum are those who advocate an emphasis on sports for the sake of the lessons learned on the field—the justification used by those who support midnight basketball programs. A number of coaches, in particular, also argue that without the appeal of intercollegiate athletics many fewer African American students would attend college. The contrary view, espoused by sociologist Harry Edwards and Henry Louis Gates, the chairman of African American Studies at Harvard, is that by excessively celebrating sports and sports heroes we fail to celebrate the success stories, the traits, and the educational values that are more enduring and more widely attainable than the fleeting glory of the slam dunk. But before we debate the effects *for the black community* of athletics as a means of access to higher education, we should examine the record of what degree of racial diversity athletics has brought to selective colleges and universities.

In 1951, fewer than 1 percent of the students enrolled at the schools in this study were reported to be black, and enrollment data at a number of the schools do not show that they had any black students at all (Scorecard 2.5). During these years, athletics provided a limited avenue of access at a very few places, with schools like Michigan and Oberlin enrolling black students who played High Profile sports in higher proportions than they were represented elsewhere on the campus. For the most part, however, African Americans who sought a college degree (regardless of their athletic interests) went mainly to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

By 1976, the world had changed. All schools in our study were now actively seeking to admit talented black students, although even with race being taken into account in admissions only 5 percent of all male students were black (the percentage was slightly higher in the Ivies). A much bigger change was evident in the High Profile sports. The overall proportion of football and basketball players coming from the African American community at the scholarship-awarding schools in Division IA was now four to five times their proportion in the student body at large. In the '89 cohort, the percentage of High Profile athletes who were black was higher yet (Figure 2.8). At the scholarship-granting schools, African Americans accounted for nearly 40 percent of all students playing football or basketball. For these students, it seems, the "golden ring" held out to African American high school students who were excellent athletes had been seized, and the campus was more racially diverse as a result. Not everyone, however, saw the picture this way:

Sociologist Harry Edwards on the role of sports in the black community:

Black communities, black families, and black student athletes themselves also have critically vital roles to play in efforts to remedy the disastrous educational consequence of black sports involvement. The undeniable fact is that through its blind belief in sport as an extraordinary route to social and economic salvation, black society has unwittingly become an accessory to, and a major perpetuator of, the rape, or less figuratively put, the disparate exploitation of the black student athlete. We have in effect *set up our own children* for academic victimization and athletic exploitation by our encouragement of, if not insistence upon, the primacy of sports achievement over all else.¹⁵

Under current admissions policies at a few universities, the athletic director who told us "If it weren't for our programs, you wouldn't see a black face on this campus," is more right than wrong; however, other minority students could presumably assume the places in the class now filled by athletes, especially if given the same resources (recruiting efforts, financial aid, and tutoring). Even at the liberal arts colleges, where there were (and are) no athletic scholarships, the opportunity to play sports was surely one part of the allure that attracted some black students who might otherwise have felt no particular desire to attend college in small rural towns like Gambier, Ohio, or Clinton, New York. And while the Ivy League football and basketball teams continued to have higher proportions of

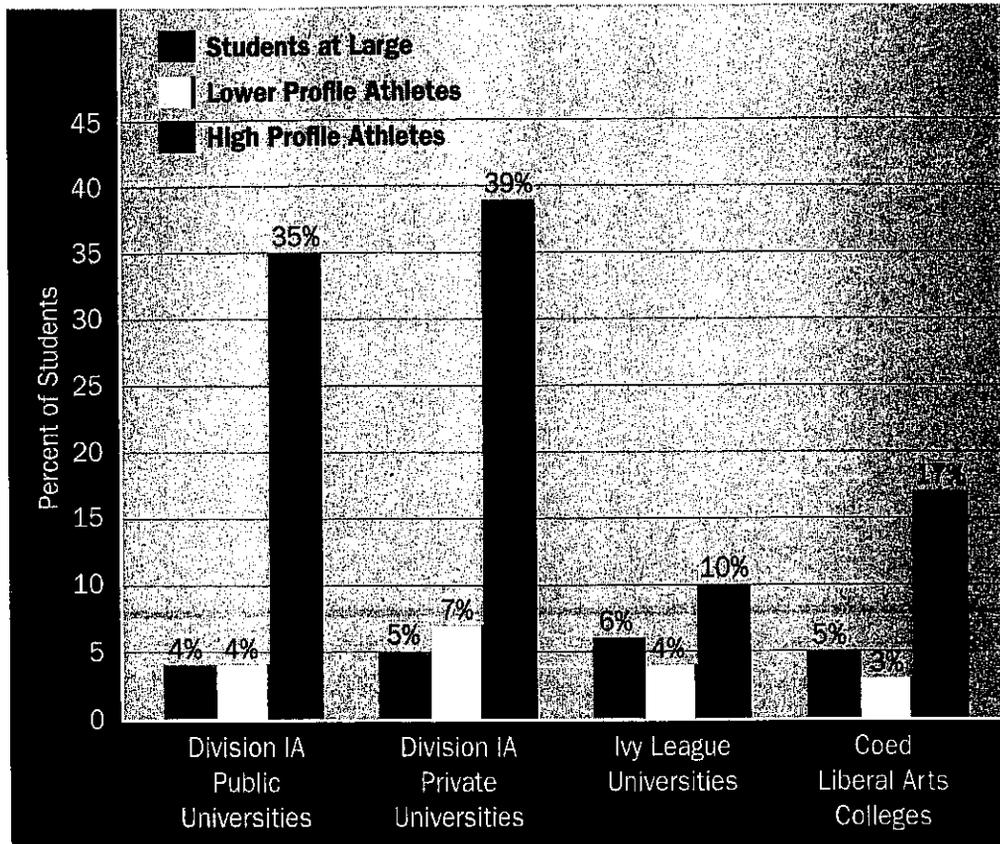


Figure 2.8. African Americans as a Percent of Male Students (by Athlete Status and Division, 1989 Cohort)

Source: College and Beyond (see Scorecard 2.5).

black players than were present in the overall student populations, the percentage of High Profile athletes who were black was lower (about 10 percent) than in the other sets of schools. This difference may be due to the influence of the Academic Index, which prescribes the SAT bands within which recruited athletes must rank. It has been argued that this internal regulation has limited the ability of the Ivy League schools to recruit talented African American athletes since, for the rest of the admissions pool, SATs are considered as one factor among many in admissions, but without any hard and fast rules about what level of scores is required.

Thus the racial composition of the High Profile sports teams has clearly helped to diversify campuses, and it has sent the message to prospective students that if you are African American you would be particularly welcome at these schools if you have football or basketball talent. The same statement cannot be made, however, for the Lower Profile sports (Figure 2.8), in which the percentage of male athletes who were black was gen-

erally in the 3 to 4 percent range. The case for recruiting athletically talented candidates to play these other sports (which account for two-thirds of the athletes on campus) cannot plausibly include reference to racial diversity.

If we conduct the same kind of test that we used earlier to estimate the net effect of athletic recruitment on socioeconomic status, we find that, although athletics helps promote racial diversity, the impact is modest. Focusing for the sake of simplicity on the sector composite, *we find that the percentage of African American males in the '89 cohort would have declined 1 percentage point, falling from 6 percent to 5 percent, if the athletic contribution to racial diversity had been eliminated—assuming that those slots and resources were not devoted to admitting other talented black applicants.*

Differences in Outlook and Goals

Anyone who has taught knows that there is nothing more limiting than a classroom that houses no disagreement. Nothing will further student learning more than a heated debate over the best way of reducing welfare rolls, the reason behind Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius, or the role of glucose in transmitting brain signals. Correspondingly, since college years should be an important period of personal growth, education occurs when lively debates take place in the dorms and the dining halls, as well as in the seminar rooms.

From this perspective, one relevant question is: what sorts of views did athletes and other students already hold when they arrived on campus? Critics of academically selective institutions often complain that these campuses are monolithically liberal, and the CIRP surveys of entering freshmen allow us to investigate this issue. We find that male athletes in the '89 entering cohort were less likely to classify themselves as either Liberal or Far Left than students at large. In the coed liberal arts colleges, for example, 34 percent of the athletes put themselves in this category, as compared with 45 percent of the students at large (Scorecard 2.6).¹⁶ We also find that athletes who played High Profile sports were less likely to classify themselves as liberal than those who played the Lower Profile sports. This finding is in part related to the differences between these two groups of athletes in socioeconomic status that we noted earlier. However, controlling for differences in socioeconomic status has only a modest effect on these differences in outlook. Athletes tend to be less liberal than other students even when we compare only those from similar family backgrounds.

Other questions on the CIRP survey that probe attitudes on specific issues of the day confirm that there are some real differences in the out-

looks typical of athletes and other students. To cite just one example, 36 percent of male athletes in the '89 entering cohort agree, or agree strongly, that "the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns" as compared with 46 percent of students at large. In short, male athletes contribute to the campus scene a somewhat different perspective than most of their classmates. The next question, to which we return in Chapter 3, is whether there is enough interaction between athletes and other students to allow these differences to have the kinds of beneficial educational effects that we would expect them to have.

Evidence of difference is also present when we shift from consideration of broad social and political points of view and ask what goals are most important to students when they enter college. Athletes, and especially those who play the High Profile sports, are much more inclined than students at large to emphasize the importance to them of achieving financial success. When asked about their goals in life, consistently higher percentages of athletes than of students at large say that, for them, it is "very important" or "essential" to "be very well off financially." Although the overall importance attached to financial success varies by type of school, the same pattern holds at every type of institution in our study, from the large Division IA public universities to the small coeducational colleges (Figure 2.9).¹⁷

It would be natural to expect first-generation college students, or students from families with modest resources, to be more concerned about making money than students from privileged backgrounds, who may simply assume that they will do just fine in the "economic game." One way of correcting for differences in family circumstances is by comparing the goals of athletes and students at large after first grouping students according to the educational attainment of their fathers. The same pattern still exists. For example, among male students at the Division III coed liberal arts colleges whose fathers were not college graduates, 32 percent of the athletes and 23 percent of the students at large said that it was "very important" or "essential" to "be very well off financially"; at the other end of the spectrum, among those whose fathers had earned advanced degrees, 22 percent of the athletes and 16 percent of the students at large checked the "very important" or "essential" to "be very well off financially" response. We will see in subsequent chapters that this strong interest in economic returns affects both choices made in college (of field of study, for example) and later decisions concerning sector of employment and occupation.

The point to emphasize is a simple one, but one that is often overlooked: decisions to admit students in order to achieve a particular objective (filling the rosters of highly competitive intercollegiate teams) have other consequences as well. As one experienced university administrator liked to say,

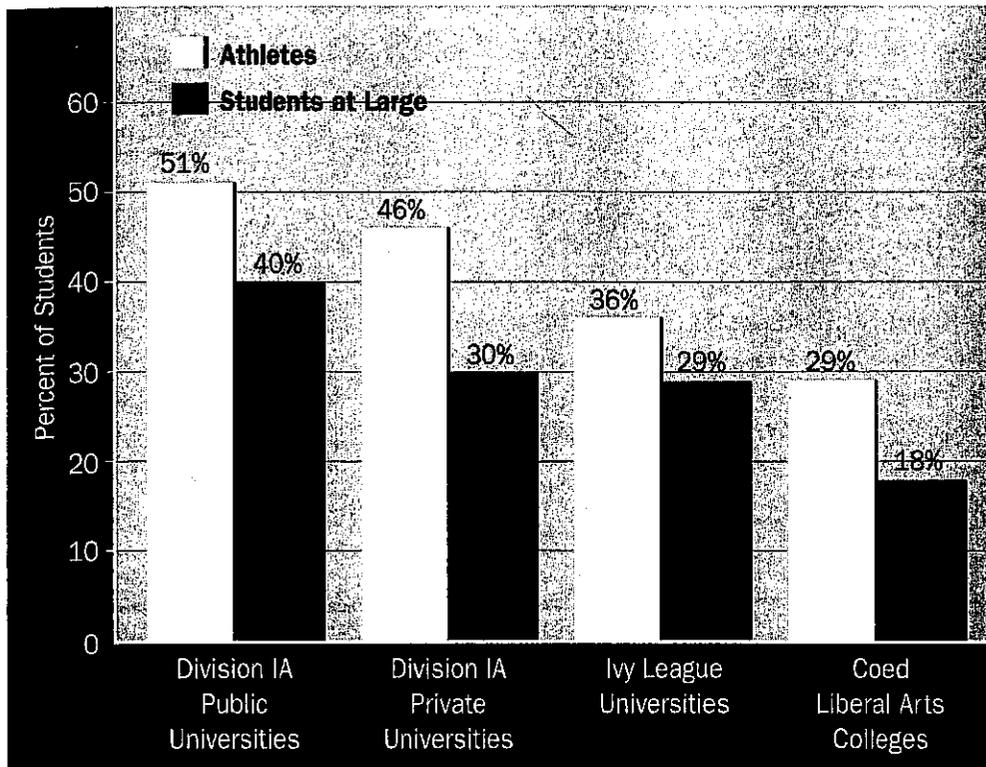


Figure 2.9. Percent of Freshmen Reporting It Is a "Very Important" or "Essential" Goal to "Be Very Well Off Financially" (by Athlete Status and Division, 1989 Cohort, Male Only)

Source: College and Beyond.

"people come in packages"—that is, one characteristic (athletic prowess) may well correlate with a wide range of other skills, characteristics, values, and goals. Much of the rest of this book is devoted to seeing how this particular "package" translates into differences in how athletes fare as students and in the paths that they choose later in the game of life.¹⁸

This examination of the recruitment and admission of male athletes has shown, first of all, that athletes make up a far higher percentage of the overall number of male students at both liberal arts colleges such as Denison or Wesleyan and at Ivy League universities than they do at large private and public universities. Thus, contrary to what many may assume, athletes will have a much greater impact on the makeup of the class—and on campus ethos—at the non-scholarship schools in our study than at universities with high-visibility athletic programs such as Michigan, where only 5 percent of the male students are athletes.

Second, the recruitment of athletes has become much more aggressive, professional, and intense. This is true at all levels of competition, including Division III, and in all sports, including the lower-visibility ones such as tennis and swimming. Coaches have come to play a much more important role in the admissions process than they used to play, and there are fewer and fewer "walk-on" athletes.

Third, as admissions has become ever more competitive at these academically selective colleges and universities, the admissions "advantage" enjoyed by athletes has increased markedly. In the case of one school for which we have complete data, the recruited athlete who entered college in 1999 had a 48 percent greater chance of being admitted than the average student at large, after controlling for differences in SAT scores. This admissions advantage has increased steadily over time and is now much greater than the corresponding advantage enjoyed by legacies and minority students.

Fourth, as one would expect, the typical athlete enters college with weaker academic credentials than his classmates. The gaps in SAT scores have grown over time (as the academic credentials of students at large have improved), and they have spread from the big-time programs to the colleges and from the High Profile sports to all sports.

Fifth, although athletes contribute to both the socioeconomic and racial diversity of colleges and universities, these effects are very small (in part because the Lower Profile sports attract relatively few minorities or others from less advantaged backgrounds). For example, we estimate that, if the athletic contribution to racial diversity were eliminated altogether, the overall percentage of male students who were African American would fall by about 1 percentage point.

Sixth, the selection effects associated with athletic recruitment are not limited to differences in academic preparation, racial mix, and socioeconomic background. Athletes also tend to be more conservative than other students and to have an appreciably greater interest in being very well off financially. These differences persist even after we control for associated differences in socioeconomic status.