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Recruiting Student-Athletes

By John V. Lombardi August 8, 2007
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Nothing gets our academic principles exercised quite as quickly as a conflict between athletic excellence and academic standards. Any issue in this

domain quickly escalates to the extremes, as various commentators leverage a specific issue into a cosmic debate about values. The recent flap triggered by my good friend Steve Spurrier is an example of this process. Sometimes it helps to be a little less extreme. For example, no one really expects to delegate academic admission decisions to an athletic department and no one really expects that academic admissions decisions will ignore non-academic issues related to special talents or circumstances. The trick is to get the balance right.

In the case of athletics, the issue really is about timing. A letter of intent may, technically, not be an admissions document, but for a recruited student-athlete, it is a mutual commitment between the student-athlete and the institution. The university guarantees a scholarship for one year in exchange for the student-athlete attending and participating in whatever sport is involved (not just football). The letter of intent also prohibits most other institutions from recruiting the student-athlete and for all practical purposes removes the student-athlete from the national recruitment competition. Once the student-athlete signs the letter of intent offered by the university's representatives, that student is no longer able to compete for scholarships from other institutions. So while we can parse the technicalities of the letter of intent, if the athletic department, which is reasonably taken by prospective students and their parents to be a fully authorized representative of the university, commits to a scholarship if the student attends and meets the NCAA minimum eligibility requirements, the university is probably not being fair to then say that it did not mean to admit the student-athlete. It may be that the athletic department exceeded its authority in offering a letter of intent to an academically inadmissible student-athlete who is otherwise eligible under NCAA rules, but this failure is not the student's failure. Instead, it is a failure of institutional control if representatives of the institution who do not have the appropriate authority, nonetheless make commitments to prospective student-athletes. This is not the student's problem it is the university's problem.

One way to fix this is to recognize that all applicants, athletic or otherwise, fall into three broad categories: those whose academic accomplishments in high school are stellar or obviously acceptable, those whose academic accomplishments in high school are poor and obviously unacceptable, and a group in the middle who may be OK and may not be OK. The first group, we admit enthusiastically, offer merit scholarships or early admission, and otherwise court. The second group we gracefully reject. The middle group however, we agonize over. How many of these should we admit, knowing that many may have difficulty achieving academic success? Some may have special talents we want (they sing, they dance, they play tennis, they write poetry) even if the rest of their academic credentials are marginal.

Perhaps they belong to a group we need to balance the diversity of our student population by region, ethnicity, gender, or international perspective. Some in this group may have famous or influential parents or patrons. All of these elements enter into a decision about admission for members of this middle group. Whatever the special circumstances, these student are rarely admitted on a simple merit basis referenced to rigid numerical standards driven by standardized tests and high school GPA's.

One way to deal with the recruitment of stellar but perhaps marginally prepared student-athletes is to have a special admissions committee that deals with these marginal cases (high talent or other desirable quality in one area, marginal academic preparation otherwise). This committee, appointed by the academic side of the university and including admission professionals, reviews these cases and makes a judgment based primarily on whether they believe the desirable if not fully prepared applicant has a reasonable chance to succeed academically. They may also consider whether the unit of the university seeking admission for this candidate has support systems in place capable of helping the student succeed with special tutoring and remediation where needed. If the committee says YES, then the athletic department, the music department, or other interested departments can recruit the prospective student. If the committee says NO, then this student is no longer eligible to be recruited by anyone in the university. The committee should make its decision as early as necessary for the recruitment to take place, and the timing issues will be different for violinists and tennis stars. As in all things controversial, an interested department (music, dance, or track) can appeal a negative decision to the provost or chancellor/president, but these worthies would likely find it wise to strongly back a carefully appointed academic committee.

The university must keep track of the results of these decisions. If the committee admits talented but academically marginal students, do these students eventually graduate? If they drop out, why did they drop out? Over a relatively short time, the institution will have a good sense of how well its committee predicts academic success in these special cases.

The university should not permit its representatives to promise what they cannot deliver and it should not deny its own departments and programs timely decisions about who can be recruited for admission. If there are issues about intercollegiate athletics in general or the academic performance of student-athletes, these issues should be addressed directly, rather than through controversies about special admissions which affect many more prospective students than just those with athletic talent.