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## The Admissions Gap for Big-Time Athletes

Consider two would-be college basketball players. One scored 850 on his SATs and had a high school grade point average of 2.75; the other scored 975 and had a GPA of 3.2. But the former enrolls at a university where his SAT is within 150 points of the average for all students at the institution. The latter's test score, though higher, puts him more than 300 points below those for the average freshman who will be sitting alongside him in class.

Which one is at more of a disadvantage academically in college? Are colleges doing a disservice to athletes if they have markedly different admissions standards for them than for other students? Or, as many sports officials argue, should colleges be held accountable more for the ultimate academic performance of their athletes on the way out (e.g., do they graduate?) than for their credentials on the way in?

Questions like those have arisen periodically about big-time college athletics, and they are likely to be raised anew by [an investigative report published Sunday](#) by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The package of articles is based on a year-long review of information submitted as part of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's accreditation-like "certification" process by more than 50 public universities that play big-time football or basketball. As part of that process, colleges provide a wide range of information and data, including, typically, on the admission of athletes.

The data collected by the Atlanta paper are difficult to compare from college to college, because they cover different years; institutions participate in the NCAA certification process only once a decade, and so admissions information for the 54 colleges range from the late 1990s through 2006.

Still, they offer an unusual glimpse at data that rarely see the light of day, and, taken together with recent investigative reports by *USA Today* (examining [the clustering of athletes in certain academic majors](#)), the *Indianapolis Star* (exploring the rates at which Division I colleges use ["special" processes to admit athletes](#) and other students), and the Associated Press (showing the [significant sums that colleges are pouring into academic support](#) for athletes), the Atlanta paper's report draws attention to the tension inherent in a system in which major colleges increasingly provide sports as high-profile entertainment with athletes whom they argue are in many ways like regular students at their institutions.

The problem is that there are many ways in which athletes, especially in sports such as football and basketball, differ radically from average students. They spend dozens and dozens of hours a week on their sports, travel away from campus for days at a time and, in some cases, integrate little with other students on campus. Some of these same things can be said of students in other time-intensive activities, such as musicians or student newspaper editors.

But that's where the question of academic preparation comes in: If athletes are entering college with significant lesser academic preparation than their peers (as measured, it should be said, by measures

such as standardized test scores and high school grades that are admittedly imperfect, though widely used), does that put them at a major disadvantage, given the intense demands on them?

## **Athletes Lag**

The Atlanta newspaper's project puts those questions front and center for many colleges. It focused its research on colleges in the six major Bowl Championship Series conferences — those that play at the highest level of NCAA football — plus a few other institutions that were highly ranked in football or basketball polls in 2007-8. It sought access to the institutions' NCAA certification reports, a process that the NCAA treats as confidential except for its ultimate result.

The newspaper did not bother to collect information from the private universities that compete in those conferences — prestigious and high-profile institutions such as Duke, Stanford and Northwestern Universities and the University of Notre Dame — because they are not subject to the state open-records laws on which the *Journal-Constitution* based its requests for information. (The newspaper did include data on one private institution, Syracuse University, that was contained in its certification report, which it [made public on the athletics department's Web site.](#)) Most of those independent institutions tend to have academically selective student bodies but to recruit from the same population of athletes as other institutions, giving them wide gaps in qualifications between their athletes and other students.

Despite those laws, even some of the public universities did not provide the relevant information, the *Journal-Constitution* noted. "Penn State and the University of Pittsburgh refused to provide the information. The University of Kansas and West Virginia University said their most recent NCAA certification self-study did not include the information. Kansas State University deleted all of its sport-by-sport data," the newspaper explained.

For those colleges that did report their information, the gaps in academic preparation between athletes and other students are wide. The average SAT for all freshmen at the colleges in question was 1161, while the average for all athletes was 1037, 124 points lower. The average SAT for football players was 941, and for male basketball players, 934.

The averages mask much wider variation among colleges. The University of Cincinnati, Clemson University, the University of California at Berkeley and Georgia Institute of Technology all had average SAT scores for their men's basketball players of roughly 950. But at Cincinnati, the basketball players were within 124 points of the student body at the urban public university; at Clemson, the gap was 201 points; at California, a highly selective flagship, 350 points; and at Georgia Tech, one of the nation's leading public institutions for science and particularly engineering, 396 points.

Similar gaps show up within conferences. To judge by the SAT scores of its freshmen, the University of Florida is the most selective institution in the Southeastern Conference, yet its football players had the lowest average SAT score, 346 points lower than the average for all students. Mississippi State's football recruits had a roughly similar academic profile, within about 20 SAT points, yet its football players were much more in line with the qualifications of the general student body there.

Whether the data suggest a problem at any particular college — or for the powers-that-be in the NCAA — is open for debate. Officials at selective institutions with big gaps say such divergences are the price of competing with institutions with more open admissions policies, and tend to point to high graduation rates as evidence that they are helping to ensure that the athletes they admit succeed, regardless of their incoming credentials.

“If you’re going to mount a competitive program in Division I-A, and our institution is committed to do that, some flexibility in admissions of athletes is going to take place,” Tom Lifka, chairman of the committee that handles athlete admissions at the University of California at Los Angeles, told the *Journal-Constitution*. “Every institution I know in the country operates in the same way. It may or may not be a good thing, but that’s the way it is.”

But critics tend to argue that the colleges are doing a disservice to athletes who come in underprepared, and suggest that colleges may be achieving those higher graduation rates, in part, by directing athletes into less demanding academic programs (hence the concerns, raised by *USA Today*, about clustering), or by giving them loads of academic help, as revealed by [the Associated Press article](#).

That debate won’t be settled here, or any time soon. But since these are statistics that aren’t usually available for public consumption, at the very least they should prompt discussion on many campuses.

A table containing key data for the various universities in the Atlanta newspaper’s report is below.

### SAT Scores for Incoming Athletes and Other Students at 54 Universities

	All Students’ Average SAT	All Athletes’ Average SAT	Men’s Basketball Players’ Average SAT	SAT Gap, Students and Basketball Players	Football Players’ Average SAT	SAT Gap, Students and Football Players	Entering Classes Examined
Alabama	1112	993	873	239	926	186	2004-6
Arizona	1120	1017	1016	104	924	196	2003-5
Arizona State	1086	1003	906	180	937	149	1996-8
Arkansas	1157	1022	910	247	Did Not Provide	N/A	2001-3
Auburn	1116	1017	910	206	922	194	2002-4
California	1298	1095	948	350	967	331	2003-5
Cincinnati	1064	1039	940	124	935	129	2002-4
Clemson	1158	1022	957	201	950	208	1998-2000
Colorado	1127	975	943	184	966	161	2000-2
Connecticut	1187	1023	903	284	956	231	
Florida	1236	1021	968	268	890	346	2002-4
Florida State	1155	1012	870	285	917	238	2002-4
Georgia	1188	1002	966	222	949	239	1997-99
Georgia Tech	1344	1109	948	396	1028	316	2003-5
Hawaii	1095	984	900	195	968	127	1998-2000
Illinois	1241	1053	940	301	952	289	2004-6
Indiana	1103	1042	990	113	973	130	2001-3
Iowa	1124	1036	870	254	994	130	2001-3
							1998-

Iowa State	1133	1058	1087	46	922	211	2000
Kansas State	1085	1024	Did Not Provide	N/A	Did Not Provide	N/A	1998-2000
Kentucky	1127	1034	964	163	962	165	2001-3
Louisville	1037	973	878	159	878	159	1999-2001
Louisiana State	1105	1000	Did Not Provide	N/A	926	179	2002-4
Maryland	1216	1054	Did Not Provide	N/A	961	255	1997-99
Memphis	1028	971	840	188	890	138	2000-2
Michigan	1264	1148	997	267	1077	187	1999-2001
Michigan State	1116	1017	932	184	917	199	2001-3
Minnesota	1150	1062	913	237	936	214	2004-6
Mississippi	1086	1002	888	198	932	154	2005-7
Mississippi State	1088	1004	832	256	911	177	2002-4
Missouri	1164	1062	951	213	942	222	2001-3
Nebraska	1129	1010	920	209	962	167	2000-2
North Carolina	1268	1080	899	369	951	317	2001-3
North Carolina State	1182	1031	916	266	926	256	2000-2
Ohio State	1163	1050	966	197	955	208	1999-2001
Oklahoma	1158	999	869	289	920	238	2001-3
Oklahoma State	1103	971	1023	80	878	225	1997-99
Oregon	1100	1018	Did Not Provide	N/A	953	147	2002-4
Oregon State	1085	1012	1009	76	997	88	1997-99
Purdue	1157	1062	945	212	974	183	2004-6
Rutgers	1184	1061	859	325	938	246	2001-3
South Carolina	1101	996	910	191	932	169	1998-2000
South Florida	1099	993	Did Not Provide	N/A	932	167	2003-5
Syracuse	1185	1045	858	327	922	263	2003-5
Tennessee	1089	1009	920	169	927	162	2000-2
Texas	1230	1037	797	433	948	282	2003-5
Texas A&M	1157	1001	892	265	911	246	2003-5
Texas Tech	1120	968	905	215	901	219	2004-6
UCLA	1275	1028	930	345	935	340	1998-2000
Virginia	1323	1129	Did Not Provide	N/A	993	330	2002-4

Virginia Tech	1200	1072	983	217	951	249	2003-5
Washington	1172	1046	951	221	949	223	2001-3
Washington State	1040	994	1013	27	916	124	1998- 2000
Wisconsin	1207	1065	1013	194	961	246	1996-98

Source: *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

— [Doug Lederman](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at  
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