

Education

Bribery scandal points to the athletic factor: A major force in college admissions

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The University of Michigan, a charter member of the Big Ten, is widely regarded as an athletic powerhouse. Brown University is not. The Wolverines are a household name and routinely draw national television audiences for football and basketball. Brown’s Bears are not and do not.

But federal data show the Ivy League school equals Michigan on one measure: They each had 910 varsity athletes in 2017.

Because Brown is smaller and more exclusive, that means a far larger share of its coveted admission offers every year — nearly 9 percent — are set aside for recruiting in sports from baseball to water polo. The athletic portion of admissions for Michigan’s public flagship is 2 percent.

These are two examples among many — drawn from interviews, documents and a Washington Post survey — that illuminate the powerful and pervasive role sports play in admissions to the nation’s most prestigious private colleges and universities.

The admissions bribery scandal unfolding since March has cast a spotlight on the connections between athletic coaches and college gatekeepers. Some schools acknowledge that a plug from a coach or athletic official can provide a strong “tip” for applicants whose academic accomplishments otherwise might not suffice to ensure admission. At the most selective schools, where stellar grades and test scores are a given, that thumb on the scale can be crucial as athletic talent helps applicants stand out.

In the scandal, wealthy parents — including actress Lori Loughlin — are accused of paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to help their children use fake athletic credentials to secure entry to prominent universities through what a consultant called “the side door.”

On Wednesday, a former Stanford University sailing coach caught in the scheme, John Vandemoer, was [sentenced in Boston](#) to one day of prison for racketeering conspiracy. But the federal judge in the case deemed the term already served, so he will avoid time behind bars. The Operation Varsity Blues investigation also led to charges against soccer, tennis, water polo and volleyball coaches at various universities.

Colleges say athletic fraud in admissions is rare. But the Varsity Blues investigation underscores a broader issue: the wide pipeline of legitimate athletic recruits into highly selective schools and the questions it prompts about equity and academic standards.

“America is so enthralled with the celebrity involvement in the scandal and the wealth being thrown around here,” said Gerald S. Gurney, an assistant education professor at the University of Oklahoma who was a longtime college athletic official. “What they ought to be talking about, in my judgment, is why is higher education giving authority to an athletic department? Why do they do that? It’s antithetical to the mission of the university.”

The pipeline benefits applicants whose parents can afford to support their children’s athletic development. That could mean activities less accessible to those who are poor: joining soccer or lacrosse clubs that travel long distances for matches, participating in niche sports such as rowing and fencing, attending sports camps organized by college coaches, or simply enrolling in an expensive private high school with a constellation of athletic offerings and manicured fields.

Many recruited athletes apply through early decision programs that require them to enroll if admitted. That, too, [benefits the wealthy](#). Those who are less affluent and aren’t certain to get athletic scholarships often need to apply later and compare financial aid offers.

The annual admission frenzy magnifies the importance of the pipeline. With admission rates plunging below 30 percent, 20 percent or even 10 percent at highly ranked colleges, students know straight A’s and high SAT or ACT scores aren’t necessarily enough to get into their first choice. Often, a crucial and perhaps decisive word comes from a coach.

Harvard University, one of the world’s most selective schools, admits fewer than 5 percent of applicants. But court documents in a lawsuit over [Harvard admissions](#) indicate that when an applicant was designated as an athletic recruit during a recent six-year period, the admission rate was 86 percent.

At the University of Southern California, which was rocked by the Varsity Blues scandal, a group representing hundreds of professors petitioned top administrators in May for “a wide-ranging discussion, led by the faculty, on the role of athletics at a major university and its relation to USC’s core mission of the pursuit of truth and knowledge. Only then can we set reasonable standards for admission of student athletes.”

Loughlin and her husband, fashion designer Mossimo Giannulli, are each facing two conspiracy charges after allegedly [paying \\$500,000](#) for their two daughters to win admission to USC as rowing recruits. They pleaded not guilty.

One of the signers of the faculty letter, USC law professor Ariela Gross, said she was surprised to learn about the importance of athletics in admissions after one of her daughters joined a lacrosse team in ninth grade. Players were mainly novices. But by the second year, the coaches were explaining athletic admissions to them, Gross said, “because lacrosse is such a good avenue to top schools. It was a revelation.”

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Her daughter did not pursue that route to college.

In 2011, Brown's president at the time, Ruth J. Simmons, grew so concerned about the athletic factor that she engineered a 9 percent reduction in admission slots reserved for recruits. The cut, to 205 a year, was meant "to appropriately rebalance academic goals and athletic interests in the Brown context," Simmons wrote.

The [statement from Simmons](#) provided a rare glimpse of the link between admissions and athletics at a highly competitive school. Varsity Blues investigators found more: Georgetown University set aside 158 admissions slots a year for recruited athletes; Wake Forest University, 128. Documents last year from the civil lawsuit, unrelated to the Varsity Blues case, disclosed that Harvard offered admission recently to an estimated 180 recruited athletes a year. The totals at those three schools represent 9 percent to 11 percent of incoming classes at each school.

'You're counting them'

Selective colleges often say they look beyond test scores and grades to build a class of students with diverse skills and interests. A flutist might draw their eye, or an accomplished rapper, a chess prodigy, a stage actress, or a scholar who is also a caregiver for young siblings or elderly relatives.

But athletics stands out as a marketing and recruiting force. Fervent alumni follow their old teams. Donors support schools with competitive programs. Many prospective students seek out schools with an athletic ambiance, whether they are football or basketball powerhouses or simply offer a broad swath of sporting pursuits. Many want to play at more than a club or intramural level.

For all those reasons, filling the rosters of soccer, rowing and other varsity sports teams is a larger and more systematic operation within the typical admissions shop than filling the campus orchestra. That is true regardless of whether a team competes in NCAA Division I, with athletic scholarships often available, or Division III, without them.

Colleges insist admissions officers, not coaches, are in charge. Christopher Gruber, dean of admissions and financial aid at Davidson College in North Carolina, said coaches routinely consult with him on whether athletes are admissible based on their record as high school juniors. The admissions shop replies with a red light — no — or a green light well before the recruit files an application. "Green comes with a caveat that their grades aren't going to be dropping," Gruber said.

To learn more about the athletic factor, The Post surveyed the top 50 national universities and top 25 liberal arts colleges as ranked by U.S. News & World Report. Most declined to reveal how many recruited athletes they admit, and some denied having any slots for athletic admission.

"We do not set aside slots for athletes," the [University of Florida](#) said.

"Athletics does not have any set aside admission slots," Emory University said.

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However, insiders say selective colleges often use slots — or numeric caps or targets — to track the number of admission offers linked to the recommendations of athletic coaches. “You’re counting them,” said one former college president, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the issue’s sensitivity. “Enumerating them. Otherwise, if you don’t enumerate them, it gets totally out of control.”

The counts are high at some liberal arts schools. At Williams, Bowdoin and Amherst colleges, federal data shows at least 30 percent of students are Division III athletes. That share is much higher than the share of total admission offers that go to recruited athletes, for two reasons. First, athletes enroll at a much higher rate than others offered admission. Second, some walk onto teams without being recruited.

An [Amherst report released in 2017](#) found the college lets in 67 recruits a year whose athletic prowess weighed “prominently” in the admission decision. The college also admits another 60 to 90 applicants a year whom coaches for the Amherst Mammoths recommend as excellent athletes. Taken together, those two groups account for at least 10 percent of annual admission offers and as much as a third of a typical incoming class.

There are about 20 unrecruited “walk-on” athletes per class, the report found, but they usually don’t get much playing time and often drop the sport after their first year.

The report also found a sharp demographic divide: Athletes were far less likely than their classmates to come from low-income backgrounds, to be first in their families to go to college or to be students of color. To address those issues, Amherst President Biddy Martin wrote in a [January 2017 statement](#) as the report was released, the college will need “recruitment strategies that are even more focused and creative.”

Wealth and privilege

At Claremont McKenna College in Southern California, officials say a coach’s endorsement provides a strongly influential admissions “tip” for about 50 to 60 student athletes a year. Others are admitted with academic credentials in the high range of the applicant pool and advocacy from a coach. The college has about 1,300 students.

Claremont McKenna President Hiram E. Chodosh said the Division III college aspires to be “the go-to college for the scholar-leader-athlete.”

But Chodosh worries about all the money that affluent parents pour into athletic trainers, traveling clubs, sports camps and other activities — separate from high school sports teams — that give their children an edge in the recruiting chase.

Too often, he said, wealth and privilege determine “who becomes a competitive athlete in a world where we have structured sport and play to an extreme.” Those disparities, he said, pose a challenge for the country and for colleges that want to level the playing field. “We have a lot more work to do there.”

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For major public universities, athletic recruiting delivers a smaller share of the class. Full or partial athletic scholarships are available to many of their student-athletes.

Michigan said it admitted 312 athletic recruits in 2018, equal to one of every 50 offers for the Class of 2022. The University of Virginia told The Post it set aside about 180 slots for athletes this year, also about 2 percent of its offers.

'An athletic league'

Most Ivy schools declined to reveal details about athletic admissions. Yale University said about 200 students a year, or 13 percent of an incoming class, matriculate with backing from athletics.

Brown spokesman Brian E. Clark said the number of athletic admission slots — reduced under Simmons — has returned to its former cap of 225 per class. Clark said the growth coincided with rising enrollment. The slots help fill rosters on 38 men's and women's teams.

“A student-athlete's experience at Brown involves both competing at the highest level and achieving academic excellence in classrooms and laboratories across campus,” Clark wrote in an email.

Out of 35,438 applicants for its fall 2018 entering class, Brown admitted 2,566, or 7 percent. Of those admitted, Clark said, 219 were recruited student athletes. All but three of the 219 matriculated.

Brown's program appears typical for the league. Federal data show 14 percent of Brown undergraduates were varsity athletes in 2017, compared with 15 percent at Yale, 16 percent at Harvard, 19 percent at Princeton University and 21 percent at Dartmouth College.

Ivy League schools provide need-based financial aid but no athletic scholarships. The league's eight members compete in an array of Division I sports, including some rarely found at the typical state flagship. Consider the indoor racket sport of squash. Federal data show that in 2017, two dozen colleges nationwide had at least 25 varsity squash players. All of the Ivies were among them. None of the Big Ten teams were.


There were more varsity athletes at Cornell University (1,116) and Harvard (1,115) in 2017 than at much larger Ohio State University (1,065) and the University of Michigan (910), according to [federal data](#). Outside the Ivy League, Stanford University had 840 — including 22 sailors — and Duke University had 659. Duke said about 5 percent of its admission offers go to athletic recruits.

For the most part, colleges do not leave the formation of teams to chance. If they compete, they want to win. That influences admissions.

“We are an athletic league,” Simmons, Brown's former president, testified last fall in the Harvard admissions trial, according to the Harvard Crimson student newspaper. “How are we going to field teams to play each other if we don't admit athletes for those teams? A lot of people outside the Ivy League believe we're not serious

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when it comes to athletics, but that's because they've never sat at a table of Ivy League presidents fighting about athletics.”

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