

## Athletics

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### The Role of Sports in Small-College Life

#### Mellon Foundation project encourages colleges to 'integrate' athletes with other students

By WELCH SUGGS

St. Louis

John A. Fry did not take long to get people at Franklin & Marshall College riled up about sports.

In 2002, six months into his tenure as president, Mr. Fry published a 30-page white paper with his assessment of the college's strengths and weaknesses. By far the most controversial point was his observation that some faculty members and administrators considered sports superfluous to campus life, a comment that upset athletes and staff members alike.

"It revealed that there really was a divide" between the two groups and their perceptions of each other, Mr. Fry said last month at a meeting here of participants in the College Sports Project, an effort sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to get liberal-arts colleges like Franklin & Marshall to confront problems with their sports programs.

The workshop brought together administrators, coaches, and faculty members from 10 colleges to discuss ways to ensure that small-college athletes are full participants in other areas of college life.

While the event did not produce a concrete plan for colleges to follow, it represented a model that the foundation hopes the National Collegiate Athletic Association and athletics conferences will replicate to help their members deal with the issue on their own campuses.

At the conference, foundation officials also announced a five-year, \$1.5-million plan for a database, to be housed at Northwestern University, that will track the academic credentials of students, both athletes and others, and their subsequent performance in college.

The database and the pilot seminar are the culmination of the Mellon Foundation's four-year-old effort to deal with what its president, William G. Bowen, has described as the "athletic-academic divide" at independent colleges, especially those with highly selective admissions policies. They do not have the commercial pressures of Division I sports, but they do share concerns about the amount of time their athletes are spending on sports instead of participating in other areas of campus life.

Participants in the conference were not unanimous, however, about solutions to this problem, and many of the coaches present were not even sure that it existed.

"Why is it an issue if we're getting good kids and they're doing what they're supposed to do?" asked Bill Raleigh, head men's basketball coach at Southwestern University, in Texas.

#### Mellon's Crusade

The impetus for the project was Mr. Bowen's two books on the subject: *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values* (with James L. Shulman, Princeton University Press, 2001) and *Reclaiming the Game* (with Sarah A. Levin, Princeton, 2003), along with a series of conversations and rule changes at the NCAA's Division III convention in recent years.

Using data gathered from the foundation's "College and Beyond" database, Mr. Bowen argued that athletes at

highly selective colleges were not doing as well as other students in the classroom, that they were concentrated in only a few majors, like business and psychology, and that they were underperforming academically relative to students with similar academic credentials. Mr. Bowen's senior adviser, Eugene M. Tobin, in charge of discussing those findings with college presidents, found them disturbed by the situation.

By the time of the June workshop, 136 colleges had signed on to become members of the College Sports Project, and the foundation brought together representatives of 10 of them -- Carleton College, Franklin & Marshall, Pomona College, Rhodes College, Southwestern, the State University of New York College at Geneseo, Ursinus College, Washington University in St. Louis, Washington & Lee University, and Wesleyan University, in Connecticut -- to discuss ways to involve athletes more fully in college life.

Participants noted many reasons for the divides between athletics and other college programs. The key issues, said Robert Malekoff, one of the project's directors, are an increase in the time commitments required of Division III athletes, often to 30 hours a week or more; the pressure on coaches to win consistently; the specialization of coaches in a single sport; the intensity and specialization of athletes at a young age; and the ever-present desire to have better teams and facilities than one's rivals.

"Division III athletics contributes more, in some ways, to institutional culture and ethos than in Division I," said Mr. Malekoff, a former soccer coach and athletics director who is now a professor of sports studies at Guilford College. At liberal-arts colleges, he pointed out, athletes often make up a third or even 40 percent of the student body.

The workshop did not attempt to come up with a set of policies or a list of best practices, but participants did talk about programs that had worked on their own campuses. One much-discussed topic was whether coaches were or should be faculty members; while none of the participating colleges grant coaches tenure, many do give them "para-faculty" status and allow them to serve on campus committees and to vote in faculty senates.

Several colleges, including Rhodes and Wesleyan, have also started "faculty mentor" programs, in which professors are assigned to teams for a season or an entire year. They attend some practices and go to both home and away games, getting to know athletes and the demands on them.

The problem with such programs, observed Carleton's president, Robert A. Oden Jr., is that they tend to attract only faculty members with a built-in interest in sports. Those who are hostile to sports or merely apathetic do not get any more exposure to the athletics program or its participants.

Carleton's athletics director, Leon Lunder, said that early in his career as a coach and administrator, he would often run into faculty members at a campus snack bar, where they would have a chance to talk about any issues that had arisen with particular athletes.

Now, he said, the added pressure of coaching jobs and the separation between academic and athletic cultures has made such "serendipitous moments" much rarer. Carleton, he added, was trying to lure staff and faculty members into the gym by offering free personal training and health-and-wellness programs for them.

### **Broadening the Conversation**

Until last month, the College Sports Project had consisted mostly of conversations among college presidents and Mellon Foundation staff members. For the foundation, inviting faculty members, provosts, athletics administrators, and coaches to the workshop was a new step -- and one that was not eagerly received by all of the coaches present.

Echoing Mr. Raleigh, the Southwestern basketball coach, many of them said that their athletes were doing fine in the classroom, and that if the students were not at every lecture or community-service project, that was their choice.

Moreover, the coaches worried that by criticizing the amount of time that athletes commit to their teams the foundation was essentially trying to de-emphasize sports. "Why would we promote mediocrity here when we promote excellence everywhere else?" Mr. Raleigh asked.

The Mellon Foundation staff members and college presidents at the meeting said they were trying to find an appropriate balance between intercollegiate athletics and the other functions of a liberal-arts college.

"In other countries, students go straight into pre-med or pre-engineering or other curricula at age 18," said Mr. Oden. At liberal-arts colleges, "we say it's worthwhile to take four years and also do a whole bunch of other things."

In addition to studying how well athletes are integrated into college life, the College Sports Project is comparing their academic credentials and outcomes with those of other students. Like bigger colleges, Division III institutions have been criticized for recruiting athletes who are not as well prepared for college life as their classmates are.

Mr. Tobin, of the Foundation, told participants that the 136 colleges involved in the project would submit the academic profiles and information about the participation of their incoming freshman classes in sports to the new data-collection center at Northwestern. The resulting database will track the class ranks and graduation rates of those Classes of 2009.

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Section: Athletics

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