

Higher Education

Varsity athletes, admissions and enrollment at top colleges

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Data from the federal government and a Washington Post survey.

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Athletics plays a powerful role in admissions and enrollment at many prominent colleges and universities.

The Washington Post surveyed more than 75 highly ranked research universities and liberal arts colleges about their athletic recruiting and admissions. It also examined a U.S. Education Department [database](#) that tracks men’s and women’s varsity athletes in intercollegiate sports.

Here are charts illuminating the scope of varsity athletics at schools on two U.S. News & World Report lists: the top 50 national universities and top 25 liberal arts colleges. Shown are the total number of students in 2017 who played at least one sport, according to the federal data, and the percentage those totals represent of all undergraduates.

Below the two charts are data from colleges in response to The Post survey on the share of admission offers given to recruited athletes.

National universities

RANK	SCHOOL	VARSITY ATHLETES	PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT
1	Princeton University	988	19
2	Harvard University	1,115	16
3	Columbia University	775	10
3	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	662	15
3	University of Chicago	471	8
3	Yale University	850	15
7	Stanford University	840	12
8	Duke University	659	10
8	University of Pennsylvania	936	9
10	Johns Hopkins University	599	11
10	Northwestern University	487	6

12	California Institute of Technology	220	23
12	Dartmouth College	889	21
14	Brown University	910	14
14	Vanderbilt University	345	5
16	Cornell University	1,116	8
16	Rice University	363	9
18	University of Notre Dame	718	8
19	University of California at Los Angeles	701	2
19	Washington University in St. Louis	513	7
21	Emory University	383	6
22	Georgetown University	693	10
22	UC-Berkeley	898	3
22	University of Southern California	562	3
25	Carnegie Mellon	425	7
25	University of Virginia	679	4
27	Tufts University	808	15
27	Wake Forest University	369	7
27	University of Michigan	910	3
30	New York University	485	2
30	UC-Santa Barbara	429	2
30	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	871	5
33	UC-Irvine	334	1
33	University of Rochester	515	8
35	Brandeis University	333	9
35	Georgia Institute of Technology	407	3
35	University of Florida	530	2
38	Boston College	705	7
38	College of William & Mary	527	9
38	UC-Davis	570	2
41	UC-San Diego	580	2
42	Boston University	575	4
42	Case Western Reserve University	494	10
44	Northeastern University	443	3
44	Tulane University	318	5

RANK	SCHOOL	VARSITY ATHLETES	PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT
46	Pepperdine University	287	9
46	University of Georgia	520	2
46	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	519	2
49	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	669	11
49	University of Texas at Austin	590	2
49	University of Wisconsin	788	3
49	Villanova University	618	9

Liberal arts colleges

RANK	SCHOOL	VARSITY ATHLETES	PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT
1	Williams College	737	36
2	Amherst College	593	32
3	Swarthmore College	402	26
3	Wellesley College	No data	-
5	Bowdoin College	653	36
5	Carleton College	369	18
5	Middlebury College	629	25
5	Pomona College*	454	-
9	Claremont McKenna College**	528	-
10	Davidson College	428	24
11	Grinnell College	386	23
11	Haverford College	423	33
11	Smith College	No data	-
11	Vassar College	405	17
11	Washington and Lee University	515	28
16	Colgate University	592	21
16	Hamilton College	609	32
18	Colby College	664	35
18	Harvey Mudd College**	No data	-
18	U.S. Military Academy	No data	-
18	Wesleyan University	623	22
22	Bates College	643	36
22	Soka University of America	72	17
22	U.S. Naval Academy	No data	-

RANK	SCHOOL	VARSITY ATHLETES	PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT
25	Barnard College***	No data	-
25	University of Richmond	380	13

*Notes: *Pomona total includes Pitzer College athletes. **Claremont McKenna total includes Harvey Mudd and Scripps college athletes. ***Barnard athletes play for Columbia.*

The Post asked the colleges and universities listed above for the number of admission slots they typically reserve for recruited athletes or for the number of recruited athletes offered admission during their most recent cycle. Most schools declined to provide such data, and many said they had no reserved slots for athletes.

But some disclosed numbers that shed light on the process.

Yale said about 200 students matriculate each year with support from its athletics department. That is about 13 percent of an incoming class.

Duke said coaches are able to recruit a “limited number” of students each year based on agreement between the athletic department and admissions office. Typically, about 5 percent of admission offers are made to recruited athletes. Of those who enroll, 8 to 9 percent of incoming first-year students are recruited athletes.

Johns Hopkins said an average of 152 recruited athletes enroll with each incoming class.

Brown said up to 225 admission slots are available for recruited athletes. For the 2018 entering class, 219 student-athletes were admitted and 216 enrolled. Brown said there is an “extensive review process and coordination” between athletics and admissions, starting long before any recruited student-athlete formally applies for admission. That includes a “thorough pre-application evaluation” of academic credentials of potential recruits.

UC-Berkeley said it admits an average of 250 student athletes a year.

U-Va. said it “held approximately 180 slots” for admission of athletes to the entering fall class.

U-Michigan said 333 recruited athletes applied for the 2018 entering class and 312 were admitted. Of those, 297 enrolled.

UNC-Chapel Hill said it allots 200 admission slots on average each year for students with special talents — 160 for students with athletic talent, 20 for students with talent in music and 20 for students with talent in dramatic arts. A faculty Committee on Special Talent advises the admissions office on admission of students recruited through that initiative. But the number of recruited athletes can be larger than 160. An annual report on athletic admissions showed that the athletic department submitted 397 potential recruits to the admissions office for pre-screening for the 2018 entering class. Ultimately, 263 of those athletes applied, 205 were admitted and 193 enrolled. About 72 percent of the recruits who enrolled came through the special talent process.

UC-Irvine said it admitted 116 recruited athletes for fall 2018, out of 138 applicants. Seventy-seven enrolled. For this year’s incoming class, it admitted 82 recruited athletes out of 116 applicants.

Rochester said it allows up to 60 admission offers to student-athletes labeled as “priority recruits,” who have met a “solid academic standard,” with grades and test scores a bit lower than those of the average admitted student. For example, it said a priority recruit with solid credentials might have a grade-point average of roughly 3.5 and an SAT score of 1250 out of 1600. The limit of 60 has been in place since 2004. Priority recruits account for about 1 percent of all admission offers.

Georgia Tech said nearly 2 percent of admitted students for the entering class of 2018 and more than 3 percent of those who enrolled were recruited athletes.

William & Mary said its athletics department is allowed to “officially recommend, or refer, a limited number” of applicants each year. Typically, there are 80 to 90 athletic referrals in an admitted class.

UC-Davis said it offered admission to 158 recruited athletes for the fall 2018 first-year class, and 148 enrolled.

Rensselaer Polytechnic, known as RPI, said about 5 percent of its 600-plus varsity athletes are “pure walk-ons.” The rest are recruited or expressed interest in athletic programs when they applied. In a typical year, about 200 recruited or potential athletes enter RPI. Lee McElroy, associate vice president and athletic director, said he works closely with the admissions office to ensure recruits meet academic standards. “That’s the key,” he said. “We follow the admissions lead.”

Claremont McKenna said 50 to 60 athletic recruits per year receive an admissions “tip,” with a coach’s endorsement strongly influencing their admission. Another set of athletes backed by coaches, whose academic credentials are in the high range of the applicant pool, are also accepted each year. That group is typically smaller than those who benefit from the athletic tip.


Davidson said it typically offers admission to 125 to 135 recruited athletes a year. Most apply through the binding enrollment program known as “early decision.” They account for about a quarter of an incoming class.

Colgate said it reserves up to 91 admission slots for athletes who apply through early decision. Of the 824 students who entered the school in 2018, 80 recruited athletes took that path. There were an additional 22 athletic recruits in that class, for a total of 102.

Teams are also filled through “walk-ons” and other students who were not given any special admission consideration for being athletes. Apart from athletics, Colgate said it also recruits for specialized programs targeting students likely to do meaningful research as undergraduates, students interested in global issues and those who have overcome remarkable challenges in their lives. Those programs accounted for 91 students in the 2018 entering class.

Richmond said it enrolls about 80 new student-athletes in a typical year, using a “rigorous process” for reviewing requests by coaches for the admission of prospective student-athletes.

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