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Athletic Scholarships and Recruitment: A Reevaluation

Is a 13 year old mature enough to go to college? Of course not! So, if college is five years away for David Sills, a middle-school student from Delaware, how is it that he has already secured a football scholarship from the University of Southern California? (Clayton). There is something awry in the values of universities that allow their sports departments to recruit such young athletes. As a seventh grader, Sills cannot possibly be ready to make a promise that he will attend a specific school, or for that matter that he will even be playing football when it is time to cash in on this agreement. This practice is nothing new in the recruitment world of intercollegiate sports; in fact, coaches will do just about anything to claim the best players before anyone else spots them, even if it means staking out elementary school sport camps. Though rules do exist in order to curb schools from staking out on the sidelines of a young athlete's life, coaches never stop finding ways to score these commitments. The processes of recruiting athletes and awarding scholarships has become uncontrollable as a 13 year old can sit pretty in school for the next five years because he has been promised a future at an academic university based solely on athletic talent.

The treatment of athletes within universities is a complex matter to discuss because huge mania subsists in college athletics. However, the David Sill case exemplifies the fact that there is a discrepancy between the historically academic mission of a university and the way that schools currently allow unfair advantages to those with athletic prowess. The inconsistency in academic values will most likely never vanish completely because the popular culture of college sports will never go away; nevertheless, the current process of athletic recruitments and bestowal of athletic

scholarships specifically provide a means by which unjust preferences can continue at an unnecessary level. Therefore, the goal should not be to eradicate the clearly valuable athletic programs present in universities, but to instead reevaluate the legitimacies of athletic scholarship and recruitments in order to ensure that these programs do not overstep their role in academic institutions. Though offers like these give students the opportunity to attend a university, there are unfortunate implications. Athletic recruitments and award of scholarships ultimately create a discrepancy within academically rooted universities, in that athletes reside on a step above their non-athlete counterparts when it comes to admission, tuition, and student support within a college. Both entities work hand in hand to engrain within a university the inconsistent preference for athletes through which corruption can thrive, often rendering some negative consequences for the athlete themselves. A change must be made to curb these negative side effects for future students.

So what constitutes recruitments and allotment of sports scholarships? Recruiting and offering athletics scholarships allow universities to secure early commitment of desirable high school athletes to their programs. The recruitment process is very complicated and governed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which ensures that recruits satisfy academic standards, recruitment officials follow rules, and neither the officials nor the recruits are taken advantage of. Legally, university sports departments can actively solicit prospective college athletes, in their high school years, in order to survey their ability to contribute to their teams (NCAA). When highly desirable student athletes are involved, coaches often compete viciously to prove that their institution can offer the best opportunities. This process often culminates in an athlete signing a “Letter of Intent”, and contracting a scholarship agreement with the school (“About the National Letter of Intent”). Scholarship availability varies from university to university, but in Division I and II schools, there exists an allotted amount of money set aside to negotiate deals

with prospective athletes. While boosters and alumni provide donations for available scholarship money, some schools, such as the University of California Santa Barbara also raise money through fees within non-athlete tuition (Khatchatourian, 1). Contrastingly, Division III schools do not offer athletic based scholarships, but instead focus more on the student part of the student-athlete as compared to Division I and II schools (Friedenberg). As declared by the mission statement of Division III school, Calvin University, colleges should, “assure that athletics programs support the institution's educational mission” (Asma). Unfortunately, athletic recruitments and scholarships can instead aid in supporting the discrepant values that hold strong in today’s athletically competitive universities.

One may wonder why academic scholarships are not scrutinized here; however, there is a clear difference between the legitimacy of athletic and academic scholarships, and for that matter athletic and academic recruitments. This difference lies within the true basis of the existence of universities: academics, not athletics. Scholarships for student athletes are essentially payment for the job of providing athletic skill to an institution, even though they said that institution is a place built based on the value of academic achievement. As mentioned by Raymond Yasser in “Academic Scholarship Disarmament”, “the ‘athletic scholarship’ is an oxymoron” (Yasser, 70). An athletic scholarship gives superfluous *academic* opportunity to someone whose *athletic ability* is outstanding. In contrast, the *academic* scholarship gives a boosted academic opportunity to someone whose *academic abilities* are already outstanding. The same goes for recruitments. It is every student’s dream to be approached by colleges seeking their attendance as opposed to the converse of desperately applying to institutions in hope that they will be noticed and accepted. Recruitments provide an advantage in the application process, in that schools show interest in a student before they even have to apply! Recruitments for academic excellence do exist as well, but

again, this entity is a logical reward for high merit in the very area that provides a reason for university existence: academic enlightenment. In essence, one reason for scholarship and recruitments is congruent with the goals engrained in a university's societal function while the other is peculiarly perpendicular to the said goals. This debate has been waged for many years, but still this incongruity prevails. With that said, in a time when it is increasingly difficult for even academically qualified applicants to get into, pay for, and get through college, this reevaluation is more important than ever before.

Between 1946 and 1964, the famous baby boomers generation was born, causing an enormous surge in the United States' population. What does this have to do with difficulty in today's college admission, one may ask? Well, college applicants today are the sons and daughters of these baby boomers, which means that numbers of college applications are rising every year to a higher and higher peak. With increasing applicants, institutions must increase their rejections. As noted by Alvin P. Sanoff in "College Applications Take Off", universities are reporting continually increasing numbers of applicants including, "...the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia's 21% jump, and the University of Denver's 14% increase." Following these increases in applications was a drop, "from a 34% to a 28% acceptance rate" (Sanoff). With this change in rates, it is clear that academically qualified, non-athlete students will continue to have a tough time getting into the colleges of their choice due to higher competition. The fact that athleticism allows a way to surpass this issue that non-athletes experience exemplifies the unjust opportunity that athletes have readily available to them. However, even if a non-scholarship student does rise above this current hardship, his future is still worrisome due to increasing financial issues.

Not only have applications increased, but also with the economic slump, many institutions are increasing tuition fees due to less government funding. Similarly, decreasing availability of

academic scholarships has made paying for college much more difficult. Budget cuts have decreased the amount of tax dollars that go to public schools by about 1,300 dollars since 2002, yet the costs of maintaining institution only increases. For example, public schools are spending, on average, about 1,500 dollars more per student since 1995, explained by Kim Clark in “The Surprising Causes of Those College Tuition Hikes” (Clark). All of these hardships culminate in a college’s need to increase tuition in order to survive. Similar to many public schools in the nation, Florida universities are expecting 15% tuition raises to continue for years, and the University of California system recently imposed raises as high as 32% (Johnson). Unfortunately, the statement that it is hard to pay for college right now would not be complete without mentioning the concurrent decrease in available money for academic scholarships (Glater). It is needless to say that with harder financial times, there is less money to give out. The current state of college admissions and tuitions make it clear that today’s students have it tough. So, now more than ever is the time to re-think the validity of giving student athletes preferential treatment concerning acceptance to and payment for college. However, this is not the sole problem that athletic scholarships and recruitments pose considering fairness within a university.

Not only do athletic recruitments and scholarships allow an unjust favoritism toward student athletes in the process leading up to university attendance, but also they provide a means for the unmerited special treatment to persist into their post enrollment life. The preliminary process of recruitment and the gift of scholarship based on athletic ability allow the special treatment of athletes to establish itself as a norm within college values. Non-athletes learn to accept that they do not get extra privileges when they hear of recruiters coming to their high schools to watch their athletic peers and when they see these students get scholarships at schools to which they must apply without similar advantages. Also, the mania surrounding major high school athlete recruitment

instills these discrepancies as acceptable values within a university. All the while, the athletes that experience the benefits of these processes accept that they are essential to a college, with the logic that, schools would not seek them out with such vigor unless they were worth the effort. This leads to a feeling of entitlement for athletes before they even set foot on campus because, "...athletes are just so separated, [so] they can't help but expect and want to be treated differently" (Brennan).

Along with this, universities attempt to further justify athlete entitlement to special treatment by claiming that student athletes endure extraordinary difficulty when it comes to blending academics and athletics because, "there is such a demand on student athletes' time" (Terris). Many athletes and critics even consider a Division I and II team participation to be more of a job, one that should provide a stipend, rather than an academically supplemental activity. This argument stems from the fact that athletes contribute to benefiting a university in the form of revenue (in major schools), booster donations, campus culture, and merchandise deals. All of these factors allow colleges to provide extra perks for student athletes without a truly threatening objection from those that are on the unequal side of the distribution on campus.

Though the specific spoils that athletes enjoy vary from institution to institution, there tends to be a general trend. Most Division I and II schools offer athletes, "...free tutoring, special study rooms and study tables, extra advisers who pay special attention to athlete's schedules, and early registration," along with free note-takers (Roepke). Free and isolated tutoring, advising, and studying rooms provide extra academic support for athlete unlike non-athletes. Any undergraduate, athlete or not, would benefit from free tutoring and advising; however the university provides unequal opportunities to only those that play sports. Also, there is no reason as to why athletes cannot share the same library, full of study space, with their fellow peers. Another clear issue lies in early registration. For example, Duke University allows, "athletes [to] register first in their classes'

registration windows, regardless of the last two digits of their social security number,” which is the usual way that students are placed in a pecking order (Fishman). Though these perks are often justified because athletes must get required classes and schedule them around practices, the fact is that all students struggle to get the classes that they need. For the rest of the student body, these perks are unfair because they provide athletes with extra services just because they are dedicated to a sport team. All the while, students that are dedicated to a difficult major must survive without any advantages.

Take Victoria Rosinski, a nursing student at the University of South Carolina, who is angered by yet another alleviation that athletes enjoy in classes. In a letter to the editor of her school newspaper, she notices that,

“While I am furiously taking notes [athletes] are either listening to their iPods, texting or sleeping. When I ask why they aren’t taking notes, they tell me their note-taker is sitting across the room doing it for them... I do recognize that being a full-time athlete is not easy, but do they realize how hard it is to be a fully committed nursing or pharmacy or pre-med major competing to get to a higher level of education” (Rosinski).

Sentiments like Victoria’s are very prevalent and justified within universities that unequally support their athletes compared to their general student body. It is illogical to argue that student-athletes need easy fixes such as note-takers to get away with paying attention in or missing class, when the sole reason for their school’s existence is that students attend class and learn from lecture. The only other group of students that are allowed note-takers at this specific University are disabled students (USC: Student Disability Services). It is needless to say that there is no way that all student athletes are disabled to the point of needing a note-taker.

An extreme example of unnecessary spoils lies in the University of South Florida's decision to, "lend out, at no cost to the students, 13-inch Macbook Pro computers to all 461 student athletes...cost[ing] about \$175,000 annually". This move is again justified by the presence of, "...such a demand on student athletes' time," but fails to acknowledge that regular students could benefit just as much from a similar program (Terris). A more effective way to deal with this issue would be to find a way to prevent athletes from having this "demand on time" instead of compensating for it with perks. Although these unfair athlete spoils have many different roots, scholarships and recruitments play large roles in allowing them to reside as accepted norms. Unfortunately, these advantages are legal now, and the inconsistency is clear. Regrettably, this discrepancy does not stop at the legal end, but often opens the door for corruption in the university system due to the obsession with attaining and keeping star athletes at competitive schools.

Sports scholarships and recruitments only exaggerate the mania surrounding college sports teams, and just as they contribute to unfair, but legal perks that athletes receive, they also open the door for moral and legal wrongdoing. These acts include finding loopholes in NCAA rules regarding the legal age of recruitment, academic fraud, and bribery. The recruitment process and scholarship awards are highly regulated by the NCAA, but even with a rulebook of 831 pages, the Association has a never-ending war with corruption when it comes to coaches committing the best players earlier than everyone else (NCAA). One might think that so many rules would make it easier to regulate with efficiency. On the contrary, the large number of rules comes with an even larger number of exceptions, and therefore a large number of loopholes. For example, NCAA rules say that schools can legally begin recruitment after a high school athlete's junior year, when the "contact period" commences for a prospective recruit (NCAA). However, schools constantly find ways around these confinements because, by definition, a prospective recruit only defines high

school students. Therefore, colleges begin to look at athletes in their middle school years, effectively bypassing legal restraints. Clearly this is not what the NCAA intended as they instated rules to ensure fair play and protection of athletes. Therefore, in order to curb this loophole, the NCAA recently included seventh and eighth graders in the definition of prospective recruits for basketball and football (Emmons). Problem solved? Not in the slightest. Even with this rule in place, coaches still have the ability to make “verbal agreements” with young athletes like David Sills, which are technically legal because no papers are actually signed. Also, some say the problem has only worsened as coaches move down to the unregulated fifth and sixth graders. Even in the case of Brock Oswieler, a high school freshman recruit, Arizona State’s assistant coach Josh Pastner had been watching Oswieler, “since he was in the fourth grade” (Withers). It is clear that recruitment at these ages is ridiculous, and this outright disregard of the need for youth to grow into knowledgeable adults before committing to a university five to six years away is unsettling. Unfortunately, as these youngsters grow up with sights for an athletic future, they often lose focus academically, leading to another issue made possible by recruitments and scholarships: academic fraud.

The presence of academic fraud is harder to track because records can be “lost” and rules can be avoided; however, many incidents do show a pattern where some coaches will throw away the morals of a university in order to keep his players eligible to NCAA standards. This issue begins as prospective athletes graduate. The NCAA tries to make sure that only academically eligible athletes are recruited and offered scholarships through its detailed rulebook, mentioned before. However, when there are rules, there is a motivation to cheat them. The most prevalent academic fraud occurs as coaches pressure high school teachers to boost prospective recruits’ grades so that they can be “legally” eligible to be offered athletic scholarships. This occurrence is not limited to

one specific school, exemplified by the fact that “nearly a third of Chicago public high school teachers say they were pressured to change [athlete] grades this past school year”. Of that group, some even admit to actually conceding to the pressure (Rossi). This is an unfortunate reality of the side effects in athletic scholarships.

Academic fraud also spreads into an athlete’s college career, as coaches desire to maintain their student investments. For example in 2007, a case concerning 61 athletes illuminated academic fraud, “which involved a learning specialist, an academic adviser and a tutor who took tests and wrote papers for athletes (Zinser). Another scandal involving Baylor University exemplifies the secrets that can be held within an institution. Specifically interesting is that it took something as drastic as a murder to prompt investigation into illegal activities. In this scandal, Patrick Dennehy, a basketball player for the school, was found murdered, and only through the investigation of this crime was light shed on a major violation. Of many, these included Coach Bliss paying for Dennehy’s and another player’s tuition even though they did not academically qualify for the scholarships that they needed in order to attend his school (Veazey). A handful of other violators within the last five years include Purdue University, University of Kansas, and Auburn University (Powers). Though scholarships are the only legal form of payment to an athlete, there is always a coach who is willing to disregard the law to get the player he wants.

The final form of corruption that recruitment brings out can be found in bribes that many major athletes receive before accepting and while attending a university. The existence of athletic scholarship awards opens the door for coaches to find ways to gain an advantage over other schools that may choose to stay within the legal boundary. A very famous case concerning this is that of Reggie Bush, a popular NFL player for USC’s football team. During his recruitment and undergraduate career, Bush and his family received over \$100,000 in gifts and cash from people

trying to keep him at the University (Dirlam). Bribes can have a very bad impact on the student athlete in the long run. Though Reggie Bush went professional, the truth is that most college athletes will need to go into the real world, and accepting bribes for playing a sport only further disserves them in preparing for life. Many critics say that these scandals are isolated incidents, but thinking back to the Baylor case: if it takes a murder to expose one institution's wrongdoing, there is no telling how many other universities hold similar secrets under their basketball courts, football fields, and baseball diamonds. Of course, the NCAA imposed consequences in all cases, but serious violations will continue until governing bodies address the root of the issue instead of the resulting violations. Though academic scholarships and recruitments are not the sole entities that cause these secretive deceptions, it is obvious that they play a part in creating a motivation for such acts.

Finally, athletic recruitments and scholarships can have an ultimate negative effect on an athlete's academic and real world success. After all, the whole point of an athletic scholarship is to award an athlete with an opportunity to academically achieve. However, both entities can often have a detrimental effect on the said opportunity. As discussed earlier, athletic recruitments and scholarships instill a mindset within a student at a very early age. The mania surrounding college recruitment shows them that athletics are to be highly valued, and they can even get someone into college. Therefore, students planning often depend on recruitment as a means of college acceptance, and learn early to put academics second. This is a huge worry today, as coaches are known to be watching athletes as young as ten years old. Hence, once students begin the recruitment process, students are more inclined to accept a spot on a less academically prestigious school's team and favor an athletic opportunity rather than an academic one. This issue can eventually affect a student when they move into the real world, where a degree from the more prestigious university could have aided in getting a job.

As an athlete progresses into his undergraduate career, even more issues can pop up. It is very true that participation in a Division I or II athletic team requires an immense time commitment. Unfortunately, the recruitment process commits a student before they have a chance to experience the academic demands of a university. Soon, many athletes begin to view their sport as a job whose payment is a scholarship. Therefore, this sense of a job again causes academics to be shoved into the background. Ultimately, the logic becomes, “school is free, why try so hard?” The loss in focus eventually affects performance in school. Unfortunately, specific grade comparisons are not available to the public, but the NCAA does publish graduation rates. In an article, “Athletes' Graduation Rates Hit Another High, NCAA Says” Libby Sander presents the NCAA’s claim that its student athletes are doing just as well as their non-athlete counterparts due to similar graduation rates (Sander). However, another article, by Woodrow E. Eckard, “NCAA Athlete Graduation Rates: Less Than Meets the Eye” points out that the NCAA’s calculations are misleading and attempt to make the ugly look pretty. The NCAA calculates these rates by comparing athletes, who are required to be full time students, to the general student body of non-athletes. However, the general non-athlete student body is made up of part-time students, full-time students, abroad students, and all other kinds. Part-time students clearly will take longer to complete a degree, and their large presence in the general student body makes athlete rates look closer to the full-time non-athletes. However, when the numbers are adjusted to exclude only full time non-athletes, the gap between the general student body progress and that of athletes widened significantly (Eckard). Clearly, student athletes are having a harder time keeping up with students that are more academically present within the university. This slacking can have a detrimental effect on the real world futures of student athletes. When they are used to all of the advantages and perks available to

them due to athletic prowess, an expectation engrains itself, one that will not go over well when trying to support oneself with none of the spoils of college athletics.

There are many implications and effects of athletic recruitments and scholarships. Though athleticism is a very valuable talent, one that should be nurtured, it has all too much weight within the university system. Athletic scholarship and recruitment, as discussed, give unfair advantages in the steps leading to university enrollment, pave the way for unequal treatment within a university, allow a means for corruption within the system, and have an ultimate negative effect on academics. A solution is needed, and some say that the answer lies with the NCAA making stricter rules. However, as demonstrated earlier, in the case of recruitment age, NCAA rules will always have loopholes. Also, in the case of academic fraud, further, “instituted academic rules may unintentionally increase the problem... and may ratchet up the pressure to get athletes,” the legal grade, even if it requires tampering with the truth (Capriccioso). Instead, a more drastic approach should be taken in order to take a step toward fair opportunity, equal treatment, rule abidance, and positive impact on student athletes. The cessation of the recruitment process and athletic scholarships will not solve each problem in entirety, but it will help to improve every area’s issue.

Without athletic scholarships and recruitment, students will be required to qualify for university admission based on academics. In his article, “For True Reform, Athletic Scholarships Must Go”, John Gerdy solidifies that, “the *athletics scholarship* at its foundation is the biggest barrier to athletes' getting a genuine educational opportunity” (Gerdy). Of course, colleges rightfully look for well-rounded students, but athleticism can still contribute to that factor without providing a means of admission based on athletics. The lack of a “detour” will motivate students that previously would have depended on recruitment to achieve academically if they want to continue to pursue athletics within college. Similarly, the lack of athletic scholarships will restore fairness in the way

that athletes versus non-athletes pay for school. Thus, “eliminating the *athletics* grant will contribute significantly to athletes' chances of obtaining a well-balanced college experience”, which can bring student athletes back down to the normal student’s level (Gerdy). Consequently, this newfound equality should trickle into student life, where preferential treatment will be less acceptable because it will not have been engrained in the minds of students before they step foot on campus. This will aid in stopping the unjust perks that athletes receive on campus, though that issue is hard to tackle because of the popular culture surrounding college athletes in general.

Another hardship would lie in stripping many fans of the suspenseful recruitment game, because “...sport fans enjoy the college recruiting season almost as much as they enjoy attending games,” but the benefit would be greater than the loss (Wells). Without the hype surrounding recruitment, there will be less of an aspiration for young athletes to work towards that fame. Again, this would lead to a focus on academics. Also, the loss of the recruitment and scholarships would allow students to choose a school based on academics, and not based on opportunities to play sports. Along with this, students would be able to begin the university experience on the academic side before choosing to commit to the athletic time obligations. Again, this would create an opportunity for students to place academic achievement as their first priority before athletics has a chance to intervene. Also, many argue that a lack of recruitment and scholarships will cause dissolution of good competition within college sports, but as mentioned by Raymond Yasser, “...athletic disarmament does not mean the destruction of highly competitive and marketable intercollegiate athletes.” He also advocates that, “...it will reinvigorate intercollegiate competition... because athletic talent will be more spread out,” therefore creating more competition than ever.

The simplest support for the cessation of scholarship offers and recruitment lies within the corruption that their existence allows. If there is no recruitment process, there is essentially no way to disobey a recruitment rule. Without the ability to entice an athlete into accepting a scholarship or a bribe, there will be many less opportunities for coaches to slip under the radar. This solution would undoubtedly be hard for some coaches to accept, and some would definitely try to get around the rule. However, when a rule consists of one point rather than 20 odd pages of rules, exceptions, and bylaws, right and wrong is much more cut and dry, allowing easier means of enforcement and policing. It is imperative that athletes are not taken advantage of and essentially employed by universities, and this solution will end that.

Interestingly, universities that do not participate in recruitment processes and scholarships for athletes do exist, but still have thriving and relevant athletic departments. Division III schools cannot offer athletic scholarships, as mentioned earlier, though they still recruit some. Many athletes that participate in these programs take pride in their lack of “payment”, and advocate the less time committing Division III way (Friedenberg). Similarly, Ivy League schools do not allow athletics scholarships at all. Some may say that lack of a negotiation factor renders a coach unable to create a capable team. However, recently, the Ivy League school Cornell surpassed many critics expectations when its basketball team, full of walk-ons that gained admission to the school without athletic recruitment or scholarships, advanced into the “sweet sixteen” of the 2010 NCAA Division I Basketball tournament. College sports fans were in shock as the walk-on team defeated the University of Wisconsin, a school that contrastingly puts money into recruiting desirable athletes and offering them scholarships (CBS News). This shows the effectiveness of such an attitude toward sports, and supports the idea that intercollegiate competition will survive the loss of academic scholarships and recruitment.

A way to further boost the success of this change would be to increase funding for club and intramural sports programs. At many schools, these programs are heavily underfunded, and a boost to their support would help provide a means by which students can still compete and grow as athletes. As Bill Pennington mentions in his article “Open Membership: Rapid Rise of College Club Teams Creates a Whole New Level of Success”, club sports are, “college athletics without the pageantry or prerogative...[and are] expertly organized, highly skilled teams that often belong to regional conferences and play for national collegiate championships” (Pennington). Both club sports and intramurals focus more on integrating athletics into a student’s academic life, rather than structuring academics around athletics. Students can make their own schedules, hire their own coaches, and compete with other universities (Pennington). The best part is that students choose their own time devotions and answer to no one other than themselves, leaving ample room to maintain the balance that is so critical between athletics and academics.

Offering athletic scholarships through recruitment truly exemplifies a discrepancy in equality within universities. There is a wide range of areas that both processes adversely affect. The issues begin as coaches scout underage children, engraining a mindset within youth that puts athletics before academics. As students begin their application process there exists advantaged opportunities in admission and tuition payment, and as they must choose between colleges there exists fraud and bribery to sway an important decision. Finally, sport scholarships can do recruited athletes an unexpected disservice by hindering their academic potential and motivation. Ending the allowance of athletic scholarships and recruitments can thwart all of these issues. Though these changes would be difficult to implement due to their acceptance within university norms, they would be beneficial and worth the struggle. The alternative is to continue adding restrictions to the never-ending list of rules, which coaches have always and will always find ways around.

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