CHAPTER 4

Athletes in College: Academic Credentials, Athletic Participation, and Campus Culture

The recruited athletes—who, as we saw in the previous chapter, enjoy a substantial advantage in the admissions process—make up a very large fraction of their class at the schools in our study (Figure 4.1). Because recruited athletes are both more likely to be accepted and more likely to enroll than are other applicants, their share of the incoming class at all of the institutions studied is far greater than their share of the applicant pool or even the admit pool. At the coed liberal arts colleges, both in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) and outside NESCAC, roughly a quarter of the men and a sixth of the women are recruited athletes. Even at the Ivy League schools, with their larger student bodies, roughly 1 in every 6 men is a recruited athlete. On the other hand, recruited athletes are a much smaller fraction of the student body (less than a tenth) at the University Athletic Association (UAA) universities and the women’s colleges. This is due to differences in both the scale of the athletic enterprise—as reflected especially in the smaller number of teams that are supported—and the emphasis given to recruiting.

In this chapter we examine the relative numbers of recruits versus “walk-ons,” the academic credentials of athletes, attrition among athletes (including years played on varsity teams), the effects of athletic recruitment on diversity, and, finally, the question of whether there is a separate “athletic culture.”

“RECRUITED” ATHLETES VERSUS “WALK-ONS”

The percentage of all athletes who were “recruited” (by our definition of having been on a coach’s list submitted to the admissions office) ranges from a high of 82 percent in the High Profile men’s sports of football, basketball, and ice hockey at the Ivies to a low of 41 percent in the Lower Profile men’s sports in NESCAC colleges (Figure 4.2). Although we suspect many of our readers will be surprised to find that the percentages of athletes who were recruited are so high, many of the coaches, athletic directors, and presidents with whom we spoke were surprised to find them
so low. Quite a few presidents asked if it could be right that there were any walk-ons in the High Profile sports. Coaches of many teams (women’s as well as men’s, Lower Profile as well as High Profile) said that they could recall only a handful of walk-ons in recent years.

There is an important definitional question: who counts as a walk-on? In our terminology, the walk-ons are those athletes competing on intercollegiate teams who were not on the coaches’ lists. Today’s typical walk-on is an accomplished athlete who has been in contact with the coach throughout the admissions process. In all likelihood, this student followed the advice of parents, secondary school coaches, and even media such as *U.S. News & World Report* and initiated contact with the coach, perhaps even providing a video highlighting his or her skills. Nonetheless, the coach decided not to include this applicant on his or her admissions list—perhaps judging that the student is not talented enough athletically, not dedicated enough to the sport, or not interested enough in the school. Louise Gengler, the head coach of women’s tennis at Princeton, says there are always many strong tennis players who apply to Princeton
that she does not include on her list because she does not envision their having an impact on the varsity squad. Sometimes these “unlisted” players do get in, and in any given year one or two might move up from the junior varsity (JV) team to the 12-person varsity squad. Other coaches related similar experiences. Each year some talented athletes who were not included on a coach’s list make their way onto campus and onto the school’s intercollegiate teams.

These walk-ons may be quite different from the walk-on athletes some might remember from days gone by. Only in a very few sports is it still possible for a student to enter college having never played the sport (“novices” as they are sometimes called) and go on to become a member of the varsity team. This was not always the case. Anita L. DeFrantz, bronze medalist and two-time Olympian in crew, saw her first shell walking to class at Connecticut College. She recalls, “I went over to inquire, and there was a man standing there. I didn’t know he was the coach, but he said, ‘This is rowing and you’d be perfect for it.’ Since I’d never been perfect at anything, I thought I’d give it a go.”

---

*Figure 4.2. Percent of Athletes Who Are Recruited, by Gender and Conference, 1995 Entering Cohort*

*Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.*
Some teams still do “recruit” outside classroom buildings and in dining halls, especially if they are looking for players to fill specific positions, such as that of a rowing coxswain or sailing crew. In a recent four-year period, Harvard’s sailing team had six All-American crews, four of whom were recruited out of the freshman lunch line. But such opportunities do not extend to all participants even in this most “amateur” of sports; in the same four years, the team had six All-American skippers, all of whom were accomplished sailors before college. Moreover, there is reason to believe recruiting will only intensify in the future. According to a recent article in *U.S. News & World Report*, “Even fencing [at Harvard] . . . is becoming more of a blood sport. ‘This is the last year as far as Harvard fencing being a walk-on sport,’ says head coach Peter Brand. Of the current squad, two of nine female starters and one of nine male starters were recruited. Next year, six of nine men will be recruits.” Opportunities to “pick up” a sport in college or join a team on a whim are increasingly limited to the club sports—ultimate Frisbee and rugby teams are often populated with high school athletes who started those sports in college—and to special places on the varsity squad in a few relatively uncommon sports.

Robert Malekoff, director of athletics at Wooster, explains the pronounced decline in walk-ons in the Division III colleges and universities as well as in the Ivies in part in terms of what has happened at the secondary school level. He notes, for example:

Lacrosse twenty years ago was primarily a regional game played in the northeastern part of the country. College coaches actively recruited walk-ons from football and soccer teams at their schools because these young men had strength and speed and could develop enough stick skills to contribute to the team . . . in some cases even to go on to play a starring role. In essence, not enough good high school players existed to fill the rosters of college teams. Today, lacrosse has become much more of a national sport at the youth and high school levels. Consequently, college lacrosse coaches can find more than enough experienced and highly skilled high school players to fill their rosters.

Not only are more highly skilled players graduating from high schools; coaches have become increasingly sophisticated at identifying these players. John Biddiscombe, Wesleyan’s athletic director, observes: “In the 1980s most Division III coaches learned about prospective players through alumni contacts, listings of All-State / All County teams, and informal and formal input from scouting contacts. . . . A number of potential prospects fell through the recruiting cracks and might show up on campus with a legitimate chance of making a team, even becoming key contributors.” This is much less likely today.
The recruits and the walk-ons constitute two reasonably distinct subgroups of athletes, and throughout the book we compare these two groups both to each other and to the remainder of the student body ("students at large"). The degree to which recruits and walk-ons are distinct subgroups depends a great deal on the recruiting and admissions processes described in the previous chapters. We might expect that at the Ivies and the NESCAC colleges, where the recruiting process is more formal and the advantage given to athletes in admissions is greater, the subgroups differ more than they do in settings where recruitment is less intensive and the admissions advantage is less pronounced. Inspection of the incoming academic credentials of athletes, as measured roughly by SAT scores, demonstrates that this is indeed the case.8

At both the Ivies and the NESCAC colleges, the relationship between athletic recruitment and lower SAT scores is striking (Figure 4.3a). In

![Figure 4.3a. SAT Scores, by Recruit Status and Gender, 1995 Entering Cohort, Ivy League Universities and NESCAC Colleges](source: Expanded College and Beyond database)
both of these settings, recruited athletes have substantially lower average SAT scores than both the students at large and the other athletes. This important finding is entirely consistent with the picture of the admissions process presented in the previous chapter: athletes on coaches’ lists are given substantial preference in admissions, but other high school athletes are not. While the gaps are largest in the High Profile men’s sports—roughly 150 points separate the average for recruited athletes from the average for students at large (165 in the Ivies and 140 in the NESCAC colleges)—they are by no means limited to these sports. The gaps in SAT scores between recruited male athletes and students at large are also sizable in Lower Profile male sports (nearly 100 points in the Ivies), and female recruited athletes have average SAT scores more than 65 points below the average for female students at large. Walk-ons in women’s sports and in men’s Lower Profile sports have average SATs that are essentially the same as those of other students. Only in the High Profile men’s sports is there a pronounced gap between the SAT scores of walk-ons and the scores of students at large (over 60 points in NESCAC); even so, the scores of walk-ons are still significantly higher than the scores of recruited athletes.9

At the other Division III schools, both colleges and universities, the relationship between recruitment and SAT scores is much looser (Figure 4.3b). In the coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC, recruited female athletes and recruited male athletes in the Lower Profile sports actually have slightly higher SAT scores than walk-ons. In these colleges, it is only in the men’s High Profile sports that athletes—both those who were recruited and walk-ons—have average SAT scores that are markedly lower than those of the students at large. In the UAA as well, it is only the athletes in the High Profile men’s sports who have lower average SATs than students at large—although, surprisingly, in these schools in these sports it is the walk-ons and not the recruited athletes who have lower average SATs. In women’s sports, the UAA universities have succeeded in recruiting teams whose SAT scores are close to indistinguishable from those of their classmates. The less well-defined relationship between recruiting and SAT scores at the UAA universities and liberal art colleges, compared to the Ivies and NESCAC colleges, is most likely due to the differences in the approaches taken to recruiting and admissions discussed in the previous chapters. These numbers indicate that at the UAA universities and the coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC, only High Profile athletes have been given some break in admissions—regardless of whether they were on a coach’s list.

The contrast between recruited athletes and students at large in the Ivies and the NESCAC colleges is dramatic, as looking at the gaps in SAT scores between these groups by sport confirms. Some of these gaps are substantial; the gap between students at large and recruited athletes in
men’s ice hockey in the Ivies is 177 points.\textsuperscript{10} Athletes in the Ivy League sports of wrestling, men’s baseball, women’s basketball, and women’s ice hockey join those in the High Profile sports of football, men’s ice hockey, and men’s basketball in having SAT “deficits” of more than 100 points; athletes in soccer, men’s swimming, and softball are close behind (Figures 4.4a and 4.4b). The differences at the NESCAC colleges are smaller in general, but the pattern is no less consistent. Only athletes in a handful of “low-recruit” sports such as cross country, crew, and sailing have average SAT scores similar to or better than those of the students at large (Figures 4.4c and 4.4d).

The significance of these gaps can of course be misinterpreted. We are certainly not suggesting that the recruited athletes enrolled by these schools were poor high school students. The recruited High Profile male athletes in the coed liberal arts colleges have a mean SAT score of 1114, which is the lowest score for any of the groups in our study, yet above the 75th percentile nationally.\textsuperscript{11} Nor are we suggesting that coaches (or admissions offices) are purposely looking for applicants with weaker cre-
Figure 4.4a. SAT Scores: Differences between Male Athletes and Male Students at Large, by Sport, 1995 Entering Cohort, Ivy League Universities

Source: Expanded College and Beyond database

Figure 4.4b. SAT Scores: Differences between Female Athletes and Female Students at Large, by Sport, 1995 Entering Cohort, Ivy League Universities

Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
Figure 4.4c. SAT Scores: Differences between Male Athletes and Male Students at Large, by Sport, 1995 Entering Cohort, NESCAC Colleges
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.

Figure 4.4d. SAT Scores: Differences between Female Athletes and Female Students at Large, by Sport, 1995 Entering Cohort, NESCAC Colleges
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
dentials. Of course not. We know from many interviews that coaches are seeking the best athletes they can recruit for their teams subject to the constraints of the academic standards at their school. But the reality is that the qualities the coaches are looking for—athletic talent, dedication to the sport, teamwork—are unlikely to be highly correlated (positively) with SAT scores; therefore, selecting on these qualities, even subject to satisfying the criterion of being above an academic threshold, necessarily produces a group of individuals with lower average SAT scores than the students at large, who are selected on the basis of other (more strictly academic) criteria.

Put another way, there are only so many high school seniors who have SAT scores above 1300, and there are only so many high school seniors who have the athletic talent necessary to play in the Ivy League; only a very small number meet both of these tests. In sports that require only a few key players, this is not too serious a problem, as these highly regarded schools can attract the needed handful of multi-talented seniors. However, the more players a coach must recruit (20 or more in a sport like football), the greater the chance there will not be enough students who meet both academic and athletic criteria. As any number of athletic directors said to us, football, in particular, is a numbers game. Fielding respectable teams, especially in an era of two-platoon football and high degrees of specialization, requires a large intake of players each year, and it is hard to fill such a large complement of places without dipping down academically. As Richard Rasmussen, the executive secretary of the UAA, explains, "You cannot just recruit from the [right-most] tail of the curve [the bell-shaped curve of academic credentials]; you have to go into the middle of the curve to get enough football players." The data support this proposition: in the UAA, football is the only sport whose players have an SAT gap of more than 50 points.

**PARTICIPATION BY SPORT AND LEVEL OF PLAY**

There are also important differences in the athletic participation of recruits and walk-ons, starting with what sports they play. Of the walk-ons—many of whom were at least partially "recruited" in the sense of having had extensive contact with the coach before matriculating and most of whom are accomplished athletes—a large number are concentrated in certain sports. In the Ivies roughly a third of all male walk-ons row crew, and in Division III roughly 20 percent run track. Football is the counterpoint to these sports. Because, like track and crew, it has large squads but, unlike track and crew, it relies almost exclusively on recruits, the percentages of all male recruited athletes who play football at the schools in
this study are very high: nearly 30 percent in the Ivies and between 30 and 40 percent in the UAA universities, NESCAC colleges, and coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC (Figure 4.5). The corresponding percentages of walk-ons who play football are 10 percent or below in the Ivies and the NESCAC colleges, and under 20 percent in the UAA universities and the coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC.

There is no equivalent to football in women's sports, and thus the female recruited athletes tend to be more evenly distributed across sports. There is still some concentration by sport among the walk-ons, however. At the Ivies and in NESCAC, most female walk-ons are found in crew, fencing, and sailing and, in NESCAC, in squash, cross country, and golf. At the other Division III schools, which field fewer teams, the walk-ons are concentrated in the more traditional sports of track, soccer, and tennis. Some sports, like tennis and squash, are viewed very differently in the Ivies than in the Division III schools. Women's tennis, for example, is much more dependent on recruits in the Ivies (more then 70 percent recruited) than in the Division III schools (fewer than 50 percent recruited).

Even with fewer than 50 percent of the players recruited, the reliance on recruiting in sports like tennis at the Division III level is more pro-

Figure 4.5. Percent of Male Athletes Playing Football, by Conference and Recruit Status, 1995 Entering Cohort

*Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.*
nounced than many would have believed it to be. It is clear that recruiting is no longer limited to the High Profile men’s teams. With the exception of a handful of sports in the Ivies and the NESCAC colleges—crew, sailing, sprint football, and, in the case of the NESCAC men’s sports, tennis—more than a third of the athletes participating in every men’s and women’s sport are recruited (Appendix Table 4.1). At the UAA universities and the coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC, the patterns are very similar. In every sport, more than a third of the athletes were recruited, and the percentages of recruited athletes are most commonly in the 50 to 70 percent range.

Recruits and walk-ons differ in the persistence of their participation in athletics, and this may help explain why some coaches found the number of walk-ons reported here so surprisingly high. In every type of sport and at every type of school, the recruited athletes play, on average, appreciably more years than the walk-ons (Figure 4.6). Thus, the fraction of athletes playing at any given time who were recruited is higher than the fraction of athletes who ever play who were recruited. We present the “ever play” comparisons. A coach, on the other hand, will most likely be answering the question “how many members of my current squad were recruited?” not “how many of the players over the past four years were recruited?”

Moreover, recruits are far more likely to play at the varsity level—and to do so for their entire playing careers. Many coaches note that the walk-ons they do have will work their way up from the JV team or from the bench and become varsity players only in their senior years, if then. Recruits, on the other hand, are expected to contribute from the beginning. Ninety-three and 95 percent of male and female recruited athletes who play in the Ivies play at the varsity level; the corresponding percentages for men and women in the NESCAC colleges are both 89 percent (Figure 4.7). More than half of the walk-ons at the Ivies and more than two-thirds of the walk-ons in NESCAC play varsity at some point in college, but walk-ons are also more likely to play for some time at the JV and freshman levels. Only about 20 percent of recruited athletes (men and women in both sets of schools) ever play JV sports, and even fewer receive freshman letters; recruits are clearly more likely to spend their entire college careers playing on the varsity squad. This pattern further inflates the recruit percentage on a varsity team at any given point in time.

Not only do recruited athletes play more years and at a higher level of play than walk-ons; they are also more likely to be the “key players” on a team and thus to feature more prominently in a coach’s mind. For five of the Ivy universities—Brown, Dartmouth, Penn, Princeton, and Yale—we were able to identify athletes who started in football. Being in the starting line-up is relatively rare—only 32 percent of the football players at these schools were starters—but recruited athletes were far more likely to
Figure 4.6. Years Played, by Conference, Type of Sport, and Recruit Status, 1995 Entering Cohort

Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
Figure 4.7. Level of Play, by Conference, Gender, and Recruit Status, 1995 Entering Cohort
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.

make the cut than were walk-ons. Over a third of the recruited football players started at some point, compared to just over a tenth of the walk-ons. Put another way, over 90 percent of the football starters were recruited athletes compared to only 78 percent of those football players who did not start.

ATTRITION OF RECRUITED ATHLETES

One of the first decisions a recruited athlete must make is whether to follow through with an implied commitment to the coach and participate in athletics. Unlike the situation at the big-time Division IA schools, where an athlete is likely to lose his or her scholarship by choosing not to play, at the Ivies and Division III schools recruited athletes are free to make this choice; they risk little more than a disappointed coach. And at least some of the athletes who are recruited will never play intercollegiate athletics; others will quit the team after one or two years. This phenomenon of athletic “attrition” has a significant impact on the athletics programs
athletes in college

at these schools and on admissions more generally, because it has clear implications for the numbers of athletes who are recruited and for the experiences on campus of recruited athletes who matriculate.

There are many reasons why recruited athletes choose not to play. Sometimes, it is alleged, applicants leverage their considerable athletic talent to receive the coach’s endorsement in the admissions process (no small advantage, as we have seen), and yet have no intention of ever playing. Others are no doubt far less calculating, but arrive on campus and find that with the myriad other options available, from singing groups to political clubs to intramural and club sports, not to mention academics, they would rather not devote themselves to a varsity sport.16 There is also the problem of “burning out.” After years of playing a sport year-round, as some have done since they were young children (in an era of increased athletic specialization), some college freshmen say that they have, as one coach put it, “lost their love of the game.” In still other cases, an injury may cut short the athletic career of a promising recruit. Athletes who are not getting much playing time may be more likely to quit a team than the regulars, and decisions of this kind can be related to all sorts of factors beyond an athlete’s control, such as the success of the team. John Thompson III, the head coach of the men’s basketball program at Princeton, reports that he rarely has problems with attrition. But then again, he notes, “The overall success of the program is probably a factor in the lack of attrition.”

For whatever combination of reasons, a non-trivial percentage of recruited athletes never play the sports for which they were recruited. At the Ivies and in the UAA universities, around 10 percent of those students who were on the coach’s lists at admissions time never play intercollegiate sports (Figure 4.8). This percentage is much higher for the liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC, where between 20 and 25 percent of recruited athletes never play. We suspect that the somewhat less intensive recruitment process at this set of schools gives those athletes who are recruited less of a sense of obligation to their coaches.

Never playing is by far the most severe form of attrition, but certainly not the only kind. Most recruited athletes play for at least a year or two, but fewer than half play a full four years. Between two-thirds and three-quarters of recruited athletes at the Ivies play at least two years, but only 40 to 50 percent play all four years (Figure 4.9).17 An Ivy League coach can expect less than three years of play from a recruited athlete and so may feel compelled to recruit and enroll three athletes for every two spots on the team.

To a coach making crucial decisions about which applicants to endorse, the presumed dedication of an athlete can thus be as important as his or her athletic talent. One Ivy League coach with whom we spoke prefers to recruit students from public schools and those who need finan-
Figure 4.8. Percent of Recruited Athletes Who Never Play, by Gender and Conference, 1995 Entering Cohort
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.

Figure 4.9. Attrition of Recruited Athletes, by Type of Sport, 1995 Entering Cohort, Ivy League Universities
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
cial aid rather than the privileged students from preparatory schools who are more typically found in the sport. These less traditional prospective students are more likely to feel grateful to the coach for helping them gain a spot at such an elite school and are less likely to quit the team. Many coaches echo the sentiment expressed by the basketball coach quoted in Chapter 2 who said he would not spend any time thinking about a student with broad interests outside sports. Throughout our conversations it has been clear that, especially as admissions offices have been working to lower the numbers of recruited athletes (as we were told they have at Columbia and Princeton, among other schools), coaches have felt compelled to look more and more for athletes who will stay with the program for all four years. As we noted earlier, we do not think it is a coincidence that the percentages of recruited athletes who never play are highest at the coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC, where the admissions advantage is smallest and the coaches’ lists are longest.¹⁸

That coaches are disappointed to lose a player is entirely understandable. It is also easy to understand why admissions officers and deans see athletic attrition as leading to a misallocation of scarce places in a class. Jonathan Cole, the provost at Columbia, comments: “At the end of the day, we have large numbers of recruited athletes who are given significant advantages in the admission process, who take up spots in the class, and who don’t play.” Given that most of those who quit teams are not playing anyway, he argues for lowering the number of recruited athletes. We consider the implications of this approach in more detail later when we focus on policy choices. However, it is worth repeating here that limiting the number of recruits puts more pressure on the coaches not to “waste a spot” by recruiting an athlete who also has other interests and may not be totally dedicated to the team. Recruiting more and more narrowly focused athletes is not necessarily a good thing at schools that pride themselves on offering a wide range of opportunities for students and on attracting students who will take full advantage of the variety of learning experiences that are available. We are left with a conundrum. We do not want to be moan a student’s decision to shift gears and pursue new interests, and yet we recognize that the student may have been admitted in preference to another student solely because of his or her athletic prowess.

**MULTI-SPORT PARTICIPATION AND SPECIALIZATION**

Whether an athlete plays all four years is not the only way of characterizing a student’s commitment to athletics. The frequency with which college athletes concentrate on a single sport, rather than play two or more sports, is a measure of the degree of specialization within athletics. To
some, including many who have spent their lives guiding athletic programs, one of the most troubling trends in athletics is increased specialization at all levels. Fewer and fewer athletes participate in more than one sport while in college. And many athletes are specializing far earlier than that. Summer sports camps and youth travel teams with year-round schedules are standard in many sports well before high school. "There's this thrust towards specialization at all levels," says [Harvard] men's basketball coach Frank Sullivan. 'Parents feel that their children have to specialize, or they won't be as good as the rest of the kids. So they wind up playing soccer all year, or basketball all year. There are loads of clinics and camps, run by entrepreneurs."¹⁹ Bob Malekoff elaborates: "Where 20 years ago a youth soccer program would consist of a fall league through September and October, far more is expected of today's elementary school-aged players. They are expected to play in a fall outdoor league, a winter indoor league, a spring outdoor league, and to attend a variety of soccer camps in the summer. In addition—if the youngster is deemed to be talented enough—he or she will participate on a variety of traveling teams that may compete against teams from other states and regions."²⁰ The pressure to compete at an early age, and to specialize, surely contributes to the "burn-out" problem noted earlier.

Consistent with trends in youth programs, collegiate seasons have also lengthened, activities in the non-traditional season have increased, and the level of play has improved markedly. According to former Harvard athletic director Bill Cleary, who played hockey for Harvard and the U.S. Olympic team, "All sports are being extended. When I played, we didn't start until December 1. Now, practice starts October 15—and we [the Ivies] are the last ones [to start practice]."²¹ Not only have the official seasons gotten longer; the non-traditional season now includes workouts, practices, and, increasingly, contests with other schools. These factors combine to make it difficult to juggle more than one sport, and few athletes even attempt it. For both the men and the women at the Ivies for whom we have data for earlier days, multi-sport participation has steadily declined (Figure 4.10).²²

Today in the Ivies, the UAA universities, and the women's colleges, only 6 to 7 percent of athletes play more than one sport; at the coed colleges in and out of NESCAC, the percentages are much higher, with roughly 20 to 30 percent of athletes playing more than one sport (Figure 4.11). Multi-sport participation has always been higher at the colleges; at the seven coed liberal arts colleges where we can make these comparisons, the relative numbers of multi-sport athletes today are roughly the same as for the 1976 entering cohort.²³ The NESCAC colleges, which sponsor so many sports with such small student bodies, must (and do) rely on second-sport athletes to fill out the squads. At the other coed liberal arts
Figure 4.10. Percent of Athletes Who Compete in More Than One Sport, over Time, 1951, 1976, 1989, and 1995 Entering Cohorts, Ivy League Universities
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.

Figure 4.11. Percent of Athletes Who Compete in More Than One Sport, by Gender and Conference, 1995 Entering Cohort
Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
colleges, the multi-sport athletes may be concentrated in a few common combinations. Indeed, 57 percent of the male multi-sport athletes at these schools play football and 44 percent run track (many of the same students compete in both of these sports).

That more athletes are able to compete in two or even three sports at the liberal arts colleges may well be a reflection of differences in the level (and intensity) of play. Susan Eichner, who coaches field hockey at Columbia, notes that competition in the Ivies is far more intense. When we spoke to her, her team had recently scrimmaged with a Division III squad, which she described as “fast, maybe faster than my girls, but not as well conditioned.” Time in the weight room, and time spent conditioning, affect the range of other activities that a student can contemplate. In all conferences, recruits are more likely than walk-ons to participate in more than one sport, and this pattern is especially evident in the colleges, where (among recruited athletes) more than 20 percent of the men and 30 percent of the women do so. Perhaps talented athletes with interests in more than one sport choose to attend colleges (rather than universities) in part because they know they will have more opportunity to play several sports there.

The degree of specialization of athletes is also clearly related to the degree of specialization of coaches. Robert Malekoff provides a “family vignette” that makes this point clearly:

As a high school student my brother, Andy Malekoff, was no different from many high school athletes in the 1970s in that he played more than one interscholastic sport. Andy was a three-sport athlete, participating in football, wrestling and lacrosse. He went on to Rutgers University . . . and continued to participate successfully in all three sports. . . . Nine members of the Rutgers football team were also members of the school’s lacrosse team. . . . One reason that nine members of the Rutgers football team also chose to play lacrosse was because the defensive coordinator of the football team also served as head coach of men’s lacrosse. That coach had a vested interest in seeing these students participate in two sports.

Malekoff goes on to note that today few, if any, Division I assistant coaches take on a second sport and that while Division III coaches once routinely coached two and sometimes three sports, they are now often responsible for only one team.94

In reflecting on the meaning and consequences of the increased specialization within athletics, it is of course important to remember, as John Biddiscombe reminds us, that “specialization in college sports has followed the same path as all of education. . . . Twenty years ago Wesleyan had a Biology Department, then Molecular Biology and Biochemistry became a major and now we have also added a Neuroscience and Behavior
major." Also, it is entirely appropriate to ask at what stages in a student’s life he or she should begin to specialize. Rasmussen draws a clear distinction in this regard between the pre-college “growing-up” stage and life in college: “While I would argue strongly that specialization of athletes at the youth and scholastic levels is inappropriate for a variety of reasons . . . I do not make that same argument at the college level. College students are assumed to be young adults. . . They should have the freedom to direct their own athletic experience.”

Dedication to any goal requires trade-offs, and Rasmussen also notes that playing several sports at the collegiate level today imposes heavy time demands on a student and makes it harder to pursue other (non-athlete) interests. We agree with Rasmussen that the decline in the number of multi-sport athletes is not in itself to be deplored; it is, however, another indication of the major commitment required today to be competitive in intercollegiate athletics.

Whatever one may think about the implications for the individual athlete of the increasing tendency to concentrate on one sport, the implications for collegiate athletics programs (and admissions) are clear-cut. The decline in the number of multi-sport athletes has a big impact on the number of recruits that a college like Swarthmore needs to enroll in order to be competitive in a wide variety of sports. If the same athlete cannot be expected to play on several teams, many more recruits are needed, and the pressures on admissions are that much greater.

DIVERSITY

The set of qualities that coaches seek—which may or may not correlate with the qualities important to the admissions office—can have other implications for the composition of a class. One important potential side effect of athletic recruiting is related to the diversity of the student body. More specifically, it is sometimes suggested that the recruitment of athletes contributes substantially to racial and socioeconomic diversity.

In investigating this issue, we made two somewhat surprising discoveries. First and most important, recruited athletes in the schools in our study are in general appreciably less likely than students at large to be from underrepresented minority groups (Table 4.1). The most notable exception to this generalization occurs in the High Profile men’s sports. At the coed colleges outside NESCAC a quarter of the recruited athletes playing High Profile sports are underrepresented minorities, compared to less than a tenth of the students at large. On the other hand, at every group of schools, fewer than 10 percent of recruited Lower Profile male athletes and no more than 5 percent of recruited female athletes are minorities. At the Ivies,
just 5 percent of recruited Lower Profile male athletes come from minority groups, and just 5 percent of the recruited female athletes are minorities. The corresponding percentages of minorities among students at large in the Ivies are 12 percent for the men and 18 percent for the women. Only at the coed liberal arts colleges outside NESCAC does athletic recruitment increase the proportion of minorities on campus. In general, the fraction of minority students represented in the student bodies of the Ivy League universities and the NESCAC colleges would have been slightly higher if recruited athletes had been replaced by other matriculants with the same racial mix as the current population of students at large; in the UAA universities, the fraction would have been unchanged. Thus, as a statistical proposition, recruitment of athletes cannot be said to have contributed to increased racial diversity on these campuses.30

The second finding is even more surprising: recruited athletes are consistently less likely than walk-ons to come from minority groups (see Table 4.1 again). In the case of the female students, the percentage of minority students among the walk-ons is often twice and sometimes three times as high as the percentage of minority students among recruits (Figure 4.12).
We have no full explanation for the relatively low numbers of minority students recruited to play most of these sports (the High Profile sports of football and basketball are the major exceptions), and we certainly do not mean to suggest that coaches discriminate against minorities when recruiting. One commentator has suggested that high-talent athletes from minority groups are especially likely to accept athletic scholarships at schools that offer such aid. Others have wondered if coaches leave minority students off their lists because they think they will be admitted anyway through affirmative action programs.

Recruiting networks may also tend to produce disproportionately large numbers of white recruits, especially in traditionally “white” sports. Reliance on certain feeder schools, and on sports camps, may be part of the explanation. Or it may be that there are not many minority athletes, especially female minority athletes, in the recruiting pools for some sports. According to Tina Sloan Green, the president and executive director of the Black Women in Sport Foundation, few minority women have access to the facilities or coaching necessary for these sports as children. Even in sports that are available to them at early ages, minority students may lack access to high-quality athletics programs at the secondary school

Figure 4.12. Female Percent Underrepresented Minority, by Conference and Recruit Status, 1995 Entering Cohort

Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
level. A deeper look at the interplay of race in America and access to athletic opportunities is beyond the scope of this study, but the current pattern is clear.

Although recruited athletes as a group do not contribute substantially to racial diversity, they may contribute to other forms of diversity, such as socioeconomic or geographic diversity. For nearly all of the colleges and universities in our study, we know which students received need-based aid. Need-based aid serves as at least a rough proxy for socioeconomic status, and we find that recruited High Profile athletes are consistently more likely than students at large to receive need-based financial aid. While between 40 and 50 percent of male students at large received need-based financial aid, the percentages of recruited High Profile athletes qualifying for need-based awards were 64 percent at the NESCAC colleges and the UAA universities, 74 percent at the Ivies, and 78 percent at the other coed liberal arts colleges (Figure 4.13). Two commentators from NESCAC colleges (William Adams at Colby and John Biddiscombe at Wesleyan) emphasized that athletic recruiting in football and basketball, in particular, has a beneficial “social class” component, in that it at-

Figure 4.13. Percent of High Profile Male Athletes and Male Students at Large Receiving Need-Based Financial Aid, by Conference and Recruit Status, 1995 Entering Cohort

Source: Expanded College and Beyond database.
tracts students from communities that differ from those that produce most of their applicants. The pattern is more mixed for other male athletes; but in no case are recruited athletes substantially less likely to receive aid than students at large (Appendix Table 4.2). On the other hand, the walk-ons in Lower Profile men’s sports and in women’s sports are generally less likely to receive aid than students at large.38

These findings are driven by the demographics of the pools of talented athletes, and should not be read as reflecting on the values or attitudes of coaches. Many are surely as conscious as other faculty and staff of the importance of a diverse campus population, while others may attach less weight to this objective. In any event, coaches should be expected to feel a primary responsibility to their teams—especially at a time when, as we have been told repeatedly, coaches are judged more and more on achieving competitive success.

CAMPUS CULTURE

Athletes—men and women, recruits and walk-ons alike—do far more in college than participate in athletics. First and foremost, they of course go to class. They are students like their classmates, and the next two chapters are concerned with the fields in which athletes major and how they perform academically—both in absolute terms and relative to their classmates. But residential universities exist because of the belief that much education occurs in myriad informal ways outside the formal curriculum. A question of interest to many involved in thinking about college sports is how well recruited athletes fit within, and contribute to, the overall life of the colleges or universities in which they are enrolled.34 Stated more narrowly, the question to be considered here is, to what extent is there a separate “athletic culture”? And, if there is such a thing, what are its implications for the institution and for the present directions in which intercollegiate athletics is tending? Does this question have greater significance for liberal arts colleges than for the larger universities?

On the most basic question of whether athletes tend to have a kind of separate identity, there seems to be considerable agreement, at least at most of the liberal arts colleges. One experienced administrator at a NESCAC college spoke of an “athletics sub-culture” and said that the hockey team had become a “mini-fraternity.” Similar references were made to football and swimming teams at other schools. The same language keeps being used. Student leaders at one NESCAC college described some teams (especially men’s teams) as “reincarnations of fraternities” and noted that team-based “clannishness” is particularly troublesome in athletics because of “the problem of numbers”—athletes
are the largest sub-group on campus. Several faculty at this same school said that "the division between athletes and non-athletes is the 'great divide' on campus." A Report on Varsity Athletics recently issued at Williams College is, if anything, even more emphatic about the pervasiveness of "something akin to a culture of athletics" on that campus: "Athletes, who often are drawn and brought to Williams because they are athletes, feel comfortable here socially. They do not think they preside over social life, but other students believe that they do. Athletes live and socialize together. Moreover, a majority of non-athlete students feel defined as non-athletes, over half of non-athlete students feel athletics is too pervasive here, and over half of our non-athlete students feel too much importance is attached to belonging to teams." 

These patterns may be most pronounced at small residential colleges, but they are also present at some universities. The former master of one of the residential colleges at Princeton, Professor Charles Berry, provides this account of the pervasiveness of the athletic culture:

One of the things that I noticed first when I got to Rockefeller [College] was the degree to which the "high profile" athletes were segregated from other students, and the rapidity with which that happened. I noticed also that the effect was to make the other, non-athlete students uninterested in varsity sports. They were not involved. Their friends were not involved, and there was no reason for them to be interested. . . . The non-athlete student body no longer identifies with the high profile athletes. The two groups are different. They have different interests. At [my residential college] we tried to counter this. . . . We spent hours attempting to rig freshman room assignments. . . . We tried to rig it so that the roommates—athletes and non-athletes—would become interested in each other, and in each other's activities. And it worked, but only for a month or so. After that the athletes were eating by themselves, playing by themselves, partying by themselves.

It is hardly surprising that large numbers of athletes spend lots of time with each other, living, eating, studying, and partying together. After all, they spend a great deal of time practicing, traveling, and competing, and strong bonds are naturally likely to form between teammates, who then, more or less inevitably, also choose to spend a great deal of informal time together. We know from several studies that, at both colleges and universities, intercollegiate athletes spend far more time on their sports than members of other extracurricular groups spend on their activities. Athletes spend around 20 hours a week on athletics; the closest extracurricular activities in terms of time spent are the performing arts (orchestra, theater, singing groups) and media (student newspaper, radio), which require on average under 10 hours a week. Thus, athletes spend more than twice as
much time on their primary extracurricular activity than even those students participating in the most time-intensive other extracurricular activities.

Equally important is the consistency of time spent on athletics by every member of the team. While the editor of the student newspaper surely spends well over 20 hours a week working on the paper, other students may participate by writing one article a week. Not so in athletics. Every player, from the bench-warmer to the super-star, attends the same regularly scheduled practices. Moreover, much of the formal time athletes spend together is spent away from campus and other students. All teams travel for games. At many schools, athletes arrive on campus earlier than their classmates for pre-season practice and spend vacations together on training trips.

Studies of informal interactions yield a similar picture. According to Cantor and Prentice, athletes may spend as much as an additional 10 hours a week with teammates outside formal group activities; more than 40 percent of the time they spend attending parties and eating and hanging out with others is spent with teammates. These numbers are similar to data for members of social groups such as fraternities, but much higher than the corresponding numbers for members of performing arts organizations.39

Housing patterns are also relevant. The Amherst Special Committee report on athletics notes:

Athletic self-segregation is reflected somewhat in housing patterns. . . . Of the 188 football players between 1996 and 2000, 56% lived in a room group consisting exclusively of football players. Of the 428 non-football male athletes, 27% lived in room groups consisting of athletes from the same sport. . . . This concentration . . . is far different from the housing patterns among female athletes . . . [Of ] 431 female athletes, . . . only 6% . . . lived in room groups consisting solely of athletes in the same sport. These housing patterns lead to upper class dorms with high concentrations of athletes and other dorms with very low concentrations of student athletes. For example, during academic year 2000, the percentage of varsity athletes in seven of the 28 upper-class dorms exceeded 50%, and in five dorms was below 10%. The concentration of athletes in selected dorms is more prevalent among men than women athletes, but in two dorms, over 30% of the residents were female varsity athletes.40

A similar picture is presented by the faculty report on varsity sports at Williams: “Team membership plays a major role in organizing housing choices. 61% of our varsity athletes met some of those they plan to live with next year on a team.”41

Rewarding friendships are undoubtedly formed as a result of opportunities to spend time together, but a price is also paid for this focus on
a close-knit group of fellow students who share a strong interest in playing varsity sports. Athletes at Amherst (which has made a particularly detailed study of these patterns) reported less involvement in other types of activities than other active students: "In each of their four years, athletes reported that being a member of their group made it significantly more difficult to attend cultural events than did other active students." Participation on an athletics team also seems to make it more difficult to meet new people; by contrast, other students feel that participation in their primary extracurricular activity helps them meet new people.

Another factor that may contribute to this perceived difficulty in meeting new people is the stigma sometimes associated with athletic participation. In earlier days male athletes, in particular, were often regarded as "big men on campus" who were cheered on by their fellow students and welcomed in any setting. Times have changed. To cite what may be an extreme case, one person at the University of Chicago notes that athletes are often viewed with some hostility by other students and are asked questions like "Why are you here?" and "Why would anyone want to play football at the University of Chicago?" Not surprisingly, athletes develop a tendency to, as this person puts it, "circle the wagons." An Amherst faculty report notes with concern that "[The 'dumb jock'] stereotype, in conjunction with a tendency among members of many athletic teams to socialize together, may be contributing to divisions within the campus community that diminish the social education of all of Amherst's students."

A faculty member at another NESCAC college, who is also a high-ranking administrator, echoed this concern and went on to express disappointment that the hope of creating a campus environment in which "terrific athletes can interact with others in a very healthy way" is not realized because "in fact, they don't." In her view, the current situation creates a "truth-in-advertising issue" for the college. Put another way, the "tighter" the athletic culture, the greater the risk of losing many of the benefits associated with a residential setting peopled by an array of interesting individuals.

There is another kind of "missed opportunity" that some believe is associated with the trend toward a more professionalized, more intensive mode of athletic competition. Ideally, competing against athletes from similar schools, with similar educational as well as athletic goals, should add a valuable dimension to college life. And we were told that spirited competition does just this in many settings. Seven Sisters' weekend tournaments are said to have precisely this effect. The UAA seems to have been especially successful in fostering an atmosphere in which players from competing schools come together after a game to share a pizza and to make or renew friendships that cross institutional lines. For example, Amy Reifert, the women's soccer coach at Chicago, told us how much she
and her team enjoy traveling to New York to compete against New York University. But in the Ivies, for example, we were told that athletes in sports such as men’s ice hockey commonly arrive for a game, play, dress, and then get back on the bus as quickly as possible—suggesting a more “professional” approach to competition. The coach of one Ivy team, who had previously worked at the Division III level in the Midwest, said that she missed the easy collegueship among coaches in her sport that she had known before. It is unfortunate, in our view, if “friendly rivalries” (with an emphasis on “friendly”) become transformed into competition of a different kind.45

Another concern expressed by faculty members and deans at a variety of schools is that the athletic culture is associated with atypically heavy use of alcohol and a variety of behavioral and disciplinary problems. A vice-president at Wesleyan referred specifically to a “disproportionate number of honor code violations which are demoralizing and time-consuming.” We attempted to collect data from the full range of institutions participating in this study that would permit a more rigorous test of such propositions, but we were unsuccessful—because of a combination of issues related to record-keeping practices and proper concerns for the privacy of certain kinds of records. We have learned, however, of several internal studies that validate the concerns expressed about disciplinary problems. Most recently, the faculty committee at Williams studying varsity athletics reported that it reviewed recent data on disciplinary incidents and honor code offenses and found:

The numbers of incidents are small, and must be approached cautiously. Nevertheless, certain patterns emerge. First, disciplinary actions in general at Williams overwhelmingly involve male students; this pattern holds for athletes as well. Second, 56% of the disciplinary actions taken against students with the A attribute [a code assigned after admissions to students expected to have a major impact in athletics] were directed towards the members of two teams. . . . Third, athletic admits were about twice as likely as the student body as a whole to receive “discuss/warnings,” and were more likely than the student body to be found culpable of multiple offenses, and receive probation, suspension, or expulsion. Finally, athletic admits were three times as likely to be found to commit honor code violations than the student body as a whole.46

Although it would be a mistake to exaggerate the significance of what is fortunately a small absolute number of infractions, the pattern is clear. From the perspective of faculty members, in particular, the most troubling aspect of the so-called athletic culture is how it interacts with a school’s academic mission. Peter Patton, professor of earth and environmental science at Wesleyan, said that in the past decade he and many fac-
ulty members have felt that there has been a shift in attitude on the part of students and coaches: "In an earlier time, there was no question but that academics came first. That is no longer the case. There appears to be a constant debate between students and faculty members about being away from classes and even exams, not meeting deadlines, etc., because of athletic schedules." The Williams faculty report also expresses special concern for scheduling issues and devotes an entire section to what it calls "the recurrent problem of scheduling." 47

Other faculty members at a variety of colleges (where these issues often seem to be seen differently than at many of the universities) consider, in the words of one of them, "the major issue to be the impact on the classroom of academically disinterested athletes. . . . Faculty are upset by the athletes' lack of preparation for classes, their underachievement, and their tendency to register in large classes and sit in the back row and do nothing." This individual went on to point out that "as teaching has become more interactive, one-fifth of the student body cannot seem to interact, and this affects everyone's experience." The Amherst Special Committee report contains an extended discussion of an "anti-intellectual 'culture'" associated with athletics, and the report quotes one student leader as saying: "It is demoralizing to the academic students that there are some athletes, especially on a few teams, who don't care about academic work." 48 Similarly, the Williams faculty report notes: "The greatest concern of the faculty in the Economics and History Departments [where many athletes enroll, as we show in the next chapter] is evidence of anti-intellectualism, of clear disengagement and even outright disdain, on the part of varsity athletes, again in particular sports. . . . Such an attitude is especially troubling because it affects the entire chemistry of a class. . . . One faculty member was sufficiently discouraged by the impact of athletes that she had come to feel it is sometimes better if athletes skip class. Then, at least, they do not taint the rest of the class with their attitude of disdain." 49

Needless to say, not everyone will agree with such assessments (at Amherst, Williams, or anywhere else), and the true picture is bound to be a complex one. 50 Some have suggested that faculty may be prejudiced against athletes, assuming that they are not serious students. One athletic director opined that some faculty are "mean-spirited" and that athletes, particularly larger male athletes, are given a hard time. Melissa Hart, the coach of women's basketball and women's soccer at MIT, says her students sometimes complain that professors are not supportive of athletes, but she adds that of course she hears about professors only when her students are having problems. Athletes report that being an athlete makes it more difficult to be taken seriously by professors, and such feelings, justified or not, can affect academic performance. 51 Needless to say, the
problem of professors' buying into a "dumb jock" stereotype can only be exacerbated by actual differences in academic outcomes, which we examine in the next chapter.

In concluding this discussion, we want to reiterate that the presence of an "athletic culture" is perceived to be much more of an issue at some institutions than at others. In general, the smaller the school and the more intimate the setting, the greater the importance of these questions. Similarly, the higher the fraction of recruited athletes in a class, the more important it is to assess the effects of their presence on campus life writ large. It is no accident that the issues we have just been discussing receive a great deal more attention in, for example, the NESCAC colleges than they do in the UAA universities.

In the next two chapters we show that academic outcomes also differ considerably by conference. There is reason to believe that "culture and outcomes" influence each other and are, ultimately, interdependent. There is even stronger reason to believe that the twin processes of recruiting and admitting highly specialized and dedicated athletes drive both culture and academic outcomes.