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Making the Varsity

College Sports and Institutional Choices

AMERICAN COLLEGE SPORTS are a historical accident. Nearly 2,000 institutions of higher learning sponsor teams in the United States, yet ours is the only country in the world where academe and athletics are so closely linked. Participating in college sports is usually a valuable educational experience for athletes, but the tension between the competitive mission of an athletics department and the academic mission of a college or university can be pernicious to both. Welch Suggs, senior editor for athletics at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, notes the privileged place sports occupy in American higher education, as well as the fact that there never was a golden age for men's college sports, when students participated simply for the honor and joy of competition. Suggs discusses why colleges and universities sponsor intercollegiate athletics programs and the various factors that affect their decisions to field teams in particular sports.

History

It is generally agreed that the first intercollegiate athletics contest occurred when Harvard and Yale rowed against each other in 1852. The event took place not in Cambridge or New Haven, but on Lake Winnipesaukee in New Hampshire because it was sponsored by the Boston & Maine Railroad, which wanted to promote a new resort on the lake. Rowing was a major spectator sport at the time and was particularly popular among gamblers; indeed, one of the main attractions for spectators was gambling on the outcome of the regatta. The circumstances surrounding this first contest are often noted with irony by observers and critics of college sports today.

Following the rise in popularity of rowing in the mid-1800s, baseball and football teams began to spring up on campuses, such that by the end of the century many of the country's most prestigious institutions had hired full-time football coaches and begun promoting their games as major social events. Still, teams were extracurricular in the most literal sense: no faculty members were involved, not even physical education teachers.

Teams developed out of student-run clubs and were taken over by university administrators early in their history. Occasionally faculty would intervene—Harvard's president insisted on banning football for a year in 1885—but by and large sports grew up outside the curriculum. Eventually, though, peer institutions began to organize themselves into conferences and associations, based largely on regional ties. The Big Ten Conference, for example, was formed as the Conference of Intercollegiate Faculty Representatives in 1895.

League arrangements began to break apart, however, in the 1950s and 1960s as institutions took different paths, usually on the question of whether to continue participating in "big-time" sports and amid numerous scandals involving bribery, point-shaving, and other sins. With the notable exceptions of Duke, Northwestern, Stanford, Tulane, and Vanderbilt, private research universities took themselves out of big-time sports. The Ivy League formed in 1954 and ceased national competition in football.

On a broader level, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was born in 1906 as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States in response to a plea from President Theodore Roosevelt to do something to end a rash of football players being maimed and killed on the field. Largely powerless in its early years, the NCAA began sponsoring championships in 1921, laying the foundation for a comprehensive structure of college sports based on attracting teams to compete for national titles.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this brief history is that there was never a time when men's college sports were simply amateur pursuits for the athletes who participated, designed to offer them the opportunity to develop their bodies as well as their minds and learn life lessons about teamwork, courage, and discipline. The focus of women's college sports, however, until late in the 20th century, was on healthy, developmental participation opportunities. It wasn't until 1981, when the NCAA began to offer championships for women's sports, and thereby put the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) out of business, that women's programs began to resemble men's intercollegiate athletics programs.

Institutional Choices

In its earliest stages, colleges and universities began to sponsor teams simply because their peer institutions had them. Since then, a number of factors have influenced institutional choices in terms of the breadth of the intercollegiate athletics programs they support and the sports opportunities they offer.

Organizational Requirements

Since their inception, some conferences and leagues have embraced the idea of "broad-based sports programs" (in today's NCAA parlance)—that is, sponsoring large numbers of teams. Most prominently, East Coast institutions and members of the Big Ten Conference have tended to support very large sports programs; today many of them enroll over 1,000 athletes apiece. Small colleges in New England have done the same thing, despite having much smaller student bodies.

Southern and southwestern colleges, in contrast, have tended to offer much smaller sports programs. Until recently, members of the Southeastern Conference, for example, rarely offered sports beyond the most popular and traditional. They have had massive football teams, often numbering over 150 athletes apiece, but never the breadth of sports offered by the New England colleges. During the 2003–04 academic year, the average number of sports offered at each of the eight Ivy League members was 18 each for men and women, whereas the average for the 12 Southeastern Conference members was 9 sports for men and 11 for women.

Tradition and, likewise, the championships that conferences choose to sponsor shape the offerings of their members. When two institutions announced decisions to drop several teams upon joining a new conference in 1999, for example, both cited the lack of league championships in the dropped sports among their reasons for the cuts.

Gender Equity and Cost Containment

By far the most controversial factor affecting a college's decisions about which sports to offer is Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the law banning sex discrimination at institutions receiving federal funds. Title IX applies to all areas of educational institutions' operations, but most people know it simply as the law that forces colleges to add women's sports.

A 1979 policy interpretation of Title IX published by what was then the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare lays out specific guidelines for how to judge whether an institution is offering equitable athletic opportunities for male and female athletes. Briefly, according to this interpretation, colleges must meet *one* of the following three conditions:

(1) Participation opportunities for male and female students are provided in numbers substantially proportionate to their respective enrollments; *or*

(2) Where the members of one sex have been and are underrepresented among intercollegiate athletes, the institution can show a history and continuing practice of program expansion for the underrepresented sex; *or*

(3) Where the members of one sex are underrepresented among intercollegiate athletes and the institution cannot show a continuing practice of program expansion, the institution can demonstrate that the interests and abilities of the members of that sex have been fully and effectively accommodated by the present program.

A series of court cases and Education Department actions in the 1990s in effect established the first test, "substantial proportionality," as a "safe harbor" for Title IX compliance. This safe harbor status promotes the first test above the other two. As a result, most colleges have taken steps to comply with Title IX by adding women's teams in an effort to achieve substantial proportionality. Many have given their coaches incentives to increase numbers of female athletes and to limit numbers of male athletes. Some, particularly colleges with Division I-A football teams, have done so by dropping men's teams.

However, to say—as Title IX's critics do—that American colleges have taken draconian measures to force their athletics offerings to adhere to a government-sponsored quota on numbers of male and female athletes is far from accurate. First, according to a 1996 study by the General Accounting Office, more than two-thirds of colleges investigated by the Education Department proved compliance with the law by meeting the second or third tests. Second, a *Chronicle of Higher Education* study of more than 1,600 colleges found that just 116 of them had proportions of female athletes within five percentage points of the proportion of female students in 2002–03. Finally, when colleges choose to drop teams, they do so for a variety of reasons. Title IX is indubitably a factor when they drop men's teams, but it is never the only or even the most important factor.

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Between 1981, when the NCAA began sponsoring women's championships, and 2003, the number of female athletes on NCAA teams grew by nearly 120 percent to over 160,000. There has been tremendous growth in women's soccer, basketball, volleyball, and softball, and some less common sports are becoming popular as well, including bowling, equestrian, and rowing. The low cost of bowling and the large squad sizes for equestrian and rowing have helped fuel the growth of those sports for women. By way of comparison, there were 217,000 men on NCAA teams in 2003.

Budgetary pressures often manifest themselves in the elimination of teams. However, ever since three highly visible lawsuits brought against institutions in the 1990s found them in violation of Title IX for attempting to drop women's teams, women's sports have rarely been dropped. In 2003, for example, 31 men's teams and three women's teams were eliminated. Most institutions in 2003 did not cite Title IX as a factor in their decisions; rather, state budgetary cuts and the need to balance departmental budgets were primary factors.

Institutional Identity and Enrollment

Colleges and universities at all levels attempt to make a name for themselves through sports. M. Christopher White, former president of Gardner-Webb University, captured this institutional motivation during a 2002 conversation in which he defended his decision to circumvent the Baptist university's honor code to keep a star basketball player eligible. Having a high-profile sports program gets a college's name on the "ticker" of scores that runs on ESPN, CNN, and other channels. It is "just like Duke and Harvard," said White. "We aspire to be like Davidson, Furman, and Wofford. Academically, we're in their league, and athletically we want to be, too."

Athletics programs can serve as important tools to recruit students, particularly at small colleges. At small liberal arts colleges, enrollments have been skewing heavily female for many years; such colleges—particularly in the South and Midwest—are adding male teams, most notably football, to boost male enrollment. Beyond the large squad

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sizes, college officials who have added football say it is easier to recruit males who may not play the sport but who want to attend a college with a football team to watch.

The extension of formerly regional sports such as lacrosse and field hockey from the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast to other areas of the country has helped to enhance the geographical diversification of some small colleges' applicant pools. At colleges in the NCAA's Divisions I and II, football, basketball, and track teams also can enhance efforts to recruit African-American students. At the University of Tennessee's Knoxville campus, for example, black male athletes accounted for 15 percent of the black men in the undergraduate student body in 2002–03.

Conclusion

College athletics teams are not now and never have been simply outlets for students' recreational enthusiasm. They serve the particular purposes of their host institutions—creating public spectacles at large universities, driving enrollment at small colleges, and, at all types of colleges and universities, playing a role in building institutional identity. In light of these purposes, the relationship between universities and their teams has a certain mercenary cast to it. Yet the organization of college athletics has withstood every challenge mounted to it for a century and a half. Barring a crisis, such as a court declaring that athletes are university employees and should be paid as such, the American college sports system is likely to remain one of the most robust organizations in academe. The essential question for colleges of all sizes and missions to consider is how their sports programs contribute to the basic goal of educating students.

College officials, coaches, and athletes themselves wax eloquent about the extraordinary nature and achievements of "student-athletes." Often, they are entirely sincere and point to many fortuitous instances of wonderful athletes who are wonderful students. In the main, however, American colleges treat athletics departments as administrative units and not as academic programs. Given this structural inconsistency, such institutions have a difficult and perennial task of reconciling athletic dreams and educational goals.

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