
The admissions scandal

Getting a peek inside the college-admissions process isn't easy. But a team of academic researchers managed to do so several years ago. It helped, no doubt, that two of the researchers were former college presidents — William Bowen of Princeton and Eugene Tobin of Hamilton.

The researchers were given access to anonymous admissions records at 19 elite colleges and then analyzed how admissions offices treated different groups of students. Low-income students, for example, were no more likely to be admitted than otherwise similar students with virtually identical academic records. So-called legacy students — those whose parents attended the same schools — received substantial boosts. So did underrepresented minorities.

But the biggest boost went to recruited athletes: An athlete was about 30 percentage points more likely to be admitted than a nonathlete with the same academic record.

I thought of that study yesterday, after the Justice Department announced it had indicted 50 people for trying to rig the admissions process. The alleged scam involved payments funneled from parents to college coaches, who in return would falsely identify applicants as athletic recruits to the admissions office. Just like that, the students then become virtual shoo-ins for acceptance.

If the accusations are true, they're outrageous. But they also highlight a larger problem in the admissions process that has somehow become acceptable: A scam like this could exist only because competitive sports occupy a ridiculously large place in that process.

The situation is different for other extracurricular activities. Great musicians are more likely to be admitted to a college than similar students who don't play an instrument — as is only fair, because musicians deserve credit for their accomplishments. But the musicians don't generally receive a 30-percentage-point boost on their admissions chances. Stage managers for the high school theater don't, either. Nor do student body presidents, debaters, yearbook editors or robotics competitors.

Athletes do. Their extracurricular activities are not treated merely as an important part of a college application, but as a defining part. "Athletic recruiting is the biggest

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form of affirmative action in American higher education, even at schools such as
outs,” as ~~Philip Smith~~, a former dean of admissions at Williams College, has said. It’s
a relic of the supposedly character-defining role that sports played in elite colleges a
century ago.

And sports have retained their unique place in the admissions process even though
most teams at elite colleges are not good enough to compete for national
championships. To put it another way, the student athletes being recruited to these
colleges are not among the very best in the country at what they do. They are
extremely good, yes, and they work hard, yes — but that also tends to be true of high
school musicians, student government leaders and so on.

I’m a sports fan and long-ago high school athlete. I have a lot of admiration for
students who are talented enough and work hard enough to play sports in college.
But they are not a different species. It’s time to end the extreme special treatment
that colleges give to so many of them. College sports can still exist without it.

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At some colleges, like Williams, nearly one-fifth of first-year students are recruited
athletes, [EphBlog](#) explains.

“Recruited athletes not only enter selective colleges with weaker academic records
than their classmates as a whole but that, once in college, they ‘consistently
underperform academically even after we control for standardized test scores and
other variables,” [Edward Fiske](#) wrote in a 2001 book review for *The Times*.

[The Times’s editorial board](#) notes that the indictments do not challenge the legal
uses of money to influence the admissions process: “What the government actually is
defending is private property — the right of the colleges to make their own decisions
about admissions, and collect the payments.” And my colleague [Frank Bruni](#) weighs
in as well.

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