

It pays to play: Why is there affirmative action for athletes?

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How do you get admitted to one of those small, highly selective liberal arts colleges? Of course, you need excellent grades in high school and an impressive SAT score. But lots of kids bring those credentials. How can you make sure you stand out among the crowd?

Be a jock. Yes, it's athletes that Harvard, Bowdoin and Williams are craving. That's the unexpected news from a study on sports and college life by James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen.

The authors of *The Game of Life* point out that the percentage of students playing intercollegiate athletics at selective liberal arts schools is much higher than at the large universities most of us associate with big-time college athletics. That's because the small liberal arts schools field teams in just as many sports—from football to squash to soccer—as the large universities do, but with a much smaller student body to draw from. Athletes make up 32 percent of the male student body at schools like Harvard and Williams, as opposed to only 5 percent at a school like the University of Michigan.

This would be a wonderful sign of the participatory possibilities at small schools, except for the fact that selective colleges aren't content just to see which brainy kid shows up and wants to play quarterback. Intent on fielding competitive teams in every sport, the selective colleges make sure that each entering class includes talented athletes who can fill slots on their many teams. That means they have to search for quarterbacks, soccer goalies and third basemen.

It also means that athletes get preferential treatment at admissions time. Being an athlete is even more of an advantage than having a family connection to the school or being a member of a racial minority. In the case of one of the schools studied, athletes had a 48 percent better chance of being admitted than those with similar SAT scores. A child of an alumnus had a 25 percent better chance, and a black

student had an 18 percent better chance.

Athletes not only get admitted despite relatively low test scores and grades. They also regularly finish their college careers in the bottom of the class. In light of this result, Shulman and Bowen question whether the nation's most highly rated colleges should be devoting so much of their educational resources to students who are not the best equipped to take advantage of them—all for the sake of having strong sports teams. Even if one regards intercollegiate sports as a significant part of college life, one has to wonder why sports play this large a role in the institution.

At a time when many voices are clamoring for colleges to stop using race as a factor in admissions, the biggest affirmative action program is not for racial minorities but for athletes. The critics of affirmative action might want to turn their attention to the value, fairness and social costs of that policy.