

Chapter 9: College Counseling, the Student-Athlete and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

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Athletics and the college admission process have a long-standing but often misunderstood relationship. The admission office is the gateway through which all athletes must pass, as well as the beneficiary of the publicity and attention a successful athletic program can bring. In fact, in the eyes of some, the invisible—but critical—cog on many a championship team is the director of admission. Every single one of the athletes who plays competitive intercollegiate athletics must first be admitted. Those involved in the process of helping prospective collegiate student-athletes take their careers to the next level must keep in mind this basic fact.

Indeed, the admission of prospective collegiate athletes is serious business—and becoming more so. As the financial stakes have risen in the world of college athletes, and as not only the public but also multiple investigative commissions (including the U.S. Congress) have begun to focus ever greater attention on college athletics, the admission and eligibility process for athletes has become increasingly complicated. Consequently, it is more important than ever that guidance and college counselors be capable of helping prospective student-athletes make the best choice possible by sorting through the various competing pressures and interests.

In this respect, the counselor's ultimate goal—finding the best fit for the prospective collegian—is no different than it is for any other student. However, given the heightened media scrutiny inherent in modern college and high school athletics, and the increasingly tangled web of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules and regulations in addition to significant financial and psycho-

ence to published deadlines. Indeed, central to the process at most schools is an athletic quota, setting aside a certain number of seats in each class for student-athletes. In most cases, the specific determination of how many spots will be allocated to each sport is left to the director of athletics. If an actual quota doesn't exist, there usually is at least a coaches' list. An applicant on such a list, if qualified (and often that means little more than being NCAA eligible), will be admitted.

This process is recognized and generally acknowledged within the college admission profession, but it is not really common knowledge. Rather, college catalogs make reference to specific talents being given special consideration in the admission process. At the same time, such set-asides do not reflect an abdication of the admission responsibility or a transfer of power. The admission office still makes the ultimate decision, and no number of coaches asserting the contrary can change that. And, of course, a failure to heed this fact can only lead to broken

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logical pressures, the process has potentially far more pitfalls for athletes than for other college-bound students.

Finally, as if the basic college admission process were not perilous enough, athletic admission is continually changing. Increased public scrutiny, coupled with recent controversies, has led the NCAA to act with remarkable speed in some areas. As a result, it is crucial that counselors stay abreast of ongoing developments in this ever-changing world.

THE ROLE OF ATHLETICS IN THE ADMISSION PROCESS

While in one respect the process by which an athlete is admitted is technically the same as for every other student, the realities are usually very different. Everything may be different for an athletic recruit, from the academic standards by which the application is measured to adher-

ences on one side and broken dreams on the other. The best programs feature a close collaboration between the coaching staff and the admission office, but if it is not built into the university's procedures, it may fall to the counselor to ensure that such collaboration is occurring, or at the very least, that there is communication between the mutually dependent parties.

Interestingly, the Supreme Court's 2003 rulings in the University of Michigan affirmative action cases have led to speculation in some reform circles about the very legality of the quota-based athletic admission approach utilized by many schools. But for the moment, the current rules of the game must guide the efforts of the counselor. The process is what it is, the rules are what they are, and modern counselors must do everything in their power to take advantage of that situation to maximize opportunities for each student.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR: HONOR THE DREAM, RESPECT THE REALITY

At its core, the distinctive role played by the modern high school counselor is that of reality checker. While even the NCAA's own Web site has included information detailing the ever-decreasing odds of a high school athlete playing in college, much less making it to the professional ranks, much of the college admission and recruiting process for a prospective student-athlete is built on dreams, images and impressions. It has evolved into a multi-player game where the student can, at its worst, be little more than a pawn. In the midst of all this, the counselor must be a clearheaded, objective player. The counselor can honor the dream, but must ensure that all parties have a healthy respect for, and consideration of, the realities of the situation. It is a critical role that requires no real athletic knowledge, but demands a full understanding of the student and the overall admission process.

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One reason counselors must be the reality checker and levelheaded ballast in this often emotionally turbulent process is because too often no one else will do so. Increasingly, the circle of people with an interest in a student's ultimate decision is growing to an almost ridiculous degree. Such people, if permitted, can play a dominant role in the process. Yet their efforts may not be focused on the student's best interest. Even parents can be capable of looking past their child's best interests, seduced by dollar signs and ego-gratifying, but illusory, scholarship opportunities. More will be written about this later; for now, it is important to recognize that with each passing year, coaches and officials in athletic programs outside the schools have come to play greater roles in the talent identification aspect of recruiting as well as making contacts with colleges.

The following sections outline the process through which the high school student-athlete makes the transition to college athlete. Much of it is beyond the bounds of the school and the counselor, but in a process in which glitz, glamor and smooth talk can blind the participants and their families, the counselor's ability to serve as an honest broker can be invaluable. As will become apparent, the process is an ongoing one, with the right question at the right time potentially critical in helping students survive and benefit from a process that can take them to great highs and deep lows.

Having established the basic role of the counselor, what follows are some signs and guideposts for the journey. One way to approach the process is to think of it as a board game. There will be pitfalls and opportunities ahead, and each time around the board will be a little different than the one before.

INITIAL ELIGIBILITY AND BEYOND: THE OTHER RULES OF THE GAME

Any athlete who wishes to receive an athletic scholarship or even participate in intercollegiate athletics at the Division I or Division II level must receive initial clearance from the NCAA's Initial Eligibility Clearinghouse. It is mandatory, with no exceptions.

The NCAA has been the primary overseer of intercollegiate athletics for almost a century. It was created in the aftermath of a higher education summit meeting called by President Theodore Roosevelt to address the increasing violence in college football. However, it was only in the wake of a series of scandals in the 1950s, some of which could be traced to admission practices, that the organization began to get involved in admission and initial eligibility.