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The Athlete's Edge

Haverford Debates Impact of Athletics

By **BILL PENNINGTON**

With a duck pond at its main entrance, a nature trail encircling the campus and more than 1,400 labeled trees and shrubs defining the grounds of its arboretum, Haverford College hardly looks like a jock school.

The athletic fields are tucked at the back of campus. The college dropped football more than 30 years ago. And of the 21 sports Haverford does play, only the men's and women's cross-country and track teams would be called powers, albeit in N.C.A.A. Division III.

Still, a contemporary debate has arisen on campus. With Haverford officials estimating that up to 15 percent of each recent freshman class was composed of students for whom athletics played some role in their admission to the college, some students, faculty and alumni have begun to question whether there is an overemphasis on athletics.

There is a new 100,000-square-foot athletic complex on the edge of campus, and noticeably, budding success in several once-downtrodden sports. Nearly 40 percent of Haverford's roughly 1,100 students play varsity sports.

"We are a small college, and when 40 percent of the students participate in intercollegiate athletics, it has a very significant impact on the ethos of the community," said Mark Gould, a professor of sociology at Haverford for 30 years. "I want us as an institution to pursue academically and intellectually intense students who come here to work very, very hard. Athletics gets in the way of that. I would be happier if athletics did not matter at all in the Haverford admissions process. And athletics matters a whole lot more than it used to."

Luke McNamara, a 19-year-old sophomore, said athletics was a divisive issue on campus for several reasons.

"There's a tension between athletes and nonathletes, probably because of the disproportional amount of money and attention devoted to athletics," McNamara, who is from Spencer, N.Y., said. "They built a new \$30 million athletic center, for example, not something for the fine arts. Other students also see athletes congregating in groups by team. It troubles me that I don't see an ongoing examination of how or why athletics furthers the academic values of the college."

Haverford's athletics budget is about \$1.8 million a year. Some peer institutions spend considerably more. Middlebury College in Vermont, for instance, has a \$4 million budget.

Jon Aisenberg, who played baseball at Haverford for parts of two seasons before graduating in 2005, said he remembered when most of the team was made up of walk-ons like himself. Aisenberg now

works for an economics consulting firm.

"It infuriates me that we're spending so much effort and time to recruit athletes," he said. "We should be attracting student-athletes who would choose Haverford College with or without a baseball team."

Many Haverford faculty members, current students and alumni said they believed that intercollegiate sports benefited the institution and did not cause noteworthy discord.

"Most students do not find the role or impact of athletics problematic," Angad Singh, co-president of the Haverford College Students' Council, said. "There are, for example, no classes scheduled between 4 and 6 p.m. every day. That's for the varsity athletes. It's not a contentious issue at all."

Bruce Partridge, a professor of astronomy, was the chairman of a faculty admissions committee last year that examined the grades of athletes and nonathletes on campus. Partridge said that the survey revealed no significant difference in grades earned, majors chosen or dormitories selected when comparing athletes and nonathletes.

Factors like the academic performance by athletes and the majors they chose at Ivy League institutions and small, elite liberal arts colleges were the core subjects of two books published this decade: "The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values" (William G. Bowen and James L. Shulman, Princeton University Press, 2001) and "Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values" (Bowen and Sarah A. Levin, Princeton, 2003). The authors, citing an athletic-academic divide, argued that athletes were underperforming academically, clustered in a few majors and had a prevailing impact on campus cultures.

Although Haverford was not a part of the database that gave structure to the books, the college's administrators conceded that they had taken them to heart.

"The books opened our eyes," Tom Tritton, the Haverford president, said. "I also think it's true that every single school that read the books, whether they were in the database or not, said: 'Well, the rest of them are like that, but not my school.' And everybody sincerely believes that's true."

"But we did a lot of internal study. And we didn't find any pattern for athletes that was different than the patterns of the overall student body. Our athletes and nonathletes are not billiard balls that only bounce off each other."

The Bowen books have fostered discussions that frequently lead to a more elemental question for institutions like Haverford: Why do elite academic institutions go to lengths to recruit athletes and then give some of them preferential treatment in admissions to field more competitive teams? Why not field teams solely with student-athletes who might show up without the support of the athletics department?

"If we didn't recruit, we would lose every game we played," Greg Kannerstein, Haverford's longtime athletic director, said. "We wouldn't be the doormat of our conference; we would be under the cellar. There would be a lot of negative consequences to something like that."

"It is no longer possible to have intercollegiate athletics without recruiting or some degree of admission preference."

Hunter R. Rawlings III is the interim president of Cornell and a member of the Haverford Board of

Managers, which is similar to other colleges' board of trustees. In an interview, Rawlings, who is a Haverford graduate, insisted that athletics should be treated as an extracurricular activity, one less important than the music or art departments. But Rawlings said it was appropriate for teams to take measures to be competitive.

"First of all, whatever an institution tries to do, it ought to try and do it well," Rawlings said. "But there's more. In sports, people keep score. If Haverford gives a music concert, no one scores it a C-minus. But if you play a basketball game and lose, 87-42, everybody sees that in the newspaper the next day. There's no way around it. Your peers, your faculty, your students and your alumni all know the score. You lost, 87-42."

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