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An Ugly Game

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By ANONYMOUS

Small colleges prey on student-athletes' varsity dreams

As a college professor and parent of a college athlete, I have been reading with great interest reports that small colleges have been seeking to increase their enrollments by promoting their sports programs. An article in The Chronicle last fall, for example, described how the president of Adrian College, in Michigan, devised a plan to raise enrollment by expanding the institution's intercollegiate-athletics program and assigning recruiting quotas to its coaches. Adrian's recruiting plan requires its 16 head coaches to sign up almost 200 athletes per year. Coaches who fail to meet their assigned quotas risk losing their jobs. The total enrollment has risen to a decades-high level of almost 1,500. Adrian's president referred to his stream of new admissions as a "fountain of youth."

While I have no problem with colleges and universities trying to raise enrollment through encouraging student participation in athletics, I do question the integrity of the recruiting and admissions process if institutions do not openly share their strategies with prospective students and parents. That includes being truthful regarding a student's likely status on varsity teams.

Our family has had a personal, less-than-ideal experience with a similar NCAA Division III intercollegiate athletics program at another private liberal-arts college. Our daughter was heavily recruited to play a varsity sport at the aforesaid college. She received numerous telephone calls, e-mail messages, and mailings from a coach that focused on her future as a collegiate player. Together with at least one of her parents each time, she visited the college on three occasions, one visit an overnight stay with a player from the team on which, we were led to believe, she would be an important member. In addition to the efforts of the coach, the admissions office was also on board, sending our daughter and family a barrage of promotion materials about the college.

After doing all she was asked, including attending summer and preseason camps and working tirelessly in practice, she and several other members of the team, who were part of an overflowing roster, were informed early in the season that they would not be active players in varsity games, might not even dress for games. They would play on a reserve team instead.

Our daughter shared with us that being recruited to play a varsity sport reaffirmed efforts she had made in school athletics; being put on the reserve team called into question what she had learned and accomplished. Moreover, it was also a distraction from other aspects of her college life. She was always wondering what practice she would be attending. Having two separate teams created an unwholesome competition and division on the team of a small college where relationships are very personal — a reason for attending a small institution in the first place.

At home, we simply could not understand. We watched in bewilderment when our daughter was allowed to dress for varsity play but stood on the sidelines during games won or lost by wide margins. We spent countless hours asking ourselves questions about the nature of athletics at small colleges that we probably should have asked during the recruiting process.

Our daughter could have gone to almost any other college or university in the United States. She graduated from a high school for the gifted with a 4.0 grade-point average; she played a varsity sport there, making the all-city roster her junior and senior years. She wanted to attend a college with a good academic reputation and play a varsity sport. She was led to believe that she could do so at College X, so she closed doors on the application process to other colleges.

We have thought long and hard about her present situation, including our possible naïveté. However, we have sensed that there was something we were not understanding about the whole process. The recruiting and admissions tactics The Chronicle described at Adrian College seem to be the answer. Perhaps our daughter was simply used to raise enrollment. Was her college hoping that, after securing her as a student, her experiences in class and her newfound friends would persuade her to continue, despite having only reserve status on the varsity team?

In consultation with colleagues and coaches elsewhere, I learned that the recruiting and admissions strategies we saw practiced are not uncommon at many small private NCAA Division III colleges. It seems that the enticement of playing intercollegiate athletics speaks to thousands of high-school athletes throughout America who want to continue playing organized sports; at the same time, it satisfies an institution's desire to maintain or increase enrollment and tuition dollars.

It is hard to put into words the frustration and distress that our daughter has experienced because her coach and her college were not truthful about the recruiting process. One day a former high-school teammate, friend, and walk-on player at another college "Facebooked" her excitement about playing against our daughter and her team in a forthcoming varsity contest. Dejectedly our daughter wrote back to say that she would not dress for the game and most likely would not be able to see her friend because she would be at a reserve-team practice on another field.

As a result of her experience, she has decided to transfer to another college, where she will be a member of the honors program, will receive generous scholarships, and will, we hope, be able to continue to play her sport.

Students and their families should not be used or manipulated by presidents, admissions counselors, or coaches to further the enrollment interests or quotas of colleges. Colleges should know better. Students like our daughter deserve better.

The author asked for anonymity because his daughter is still enrolled at the college he describes.

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