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# The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values

*James L. Shulman, William G. Bowen*

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The President of Williams College faces a firestorm for not allowing the women's lacrosse team to postpone exams to attend the playoffs. The University of Michigan loses $2.8 million on athletics despite averaging 110,000 fans at each home football game. Schools across the country struggle with the tradeoffs involved with recruiting athletes and updating facilities for dozens of varsity sports. Does increasing intensification of college sports support or detract from higher education's core mission?

James Shulman and William Bowen introduce facts into a terrain overrun by emotions and enduring myths. Using the same database that informed *The Shape of the River*, the authors analyze data on 90,000 students who attended thirty selective colleges and universities in the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s. Drawing also on historical research and new information on giving and spending, the authors demonstrate how athletics influence the class composition and campus ethos of selective schools, as well as the messages that these institutions send to prospective students, their parents, and society at large.

Shulman and Bowen show that athletic programs raise even more difficult questions of educational policy for small private colleges and highly selective universities than they do for big-time scholarship-granting schools. They discover that today's athletes, more so than their predecessors, enter college less academically well-prepared and with different goals and values than their classmates--differences that lead to different lives. They reveal that gender equity efforts have wrought large, sometimes unanticipated changes. And they show that the alumni appetite for winning teams is not--as schools often assume--insatiable. If a culprit emerges, it is the unquestioned spread of a changed athletic culture through the emulation of highly publicized teams by low-profile sports, of men's programs by women's, and of athletic powerhouses by small colleges.

Shulman and Bowen celebrate the benefits of collegiate sports, while identifying the subtle ways in which athletic intensification can pull even prestigious institutions from their missions. By examining how athletes and other graduates view The Game of Life--and how colleges shape society's view of what its rules should be--Bowen and Shulman go far beyond sports. They tell us about higher education today: the ways in which colleges set policies, reinforce or neglect their core mission, and send signals about what matters.

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