

## FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF

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### College Athletes Who Never Graduate

*Herbert London*

**C**lifford Adelman, of the Department of Education, argues that the graduation rates of athletes should be higher than those of other students since the former have a “safety net” of financial support and tutoring generally unavailable to others. Yet athletes have much lower rates of graduation. And this despite the fact that many are engaged in academic programs that could be generously described as fraudulent. (Athletes often study weight-lifting, sports appreciation, and gym techniques, hardly opening a book or exciting the concern of coaches largely indifferent to their academic progress.)

Unfortunately, all of this is most glaringly true in the case of black athletes. A recent survey conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* indicates that at nearly half of 248 Division I colleges fewer than one-third of black male athletes graduate in a six-year period. At eighty of the colleges, fewer than one in every four black male athletes receives a degree in six years—a graduation rate two times lower than their white counterparts.

In three leagues playing big-time football—the Big Eight, the Big West Conference, and the Western Athletic Conference—the graduation rates for black male athletes are below 25 percent. For the Southeastern and Southwest conferences the rate is below 30 percent. Senator Bill Bradley has called for research into the reasons for this gap between white and black. But this must be a disingenuous suggestion. Bradley and everyone else knows precisely why black male athletes don’t graduate.

Many of our super quality black athletes are scouted, nurtured, coddled, and offered every conceivable privilege—except that of a good education—from their sophomore year in high school until they enter college. As a result their attention is focused exclusively on sports. Were it not for their athletic prowess, probably 75 percent of these students would not get to college at all.

Doubtless, some of these athletes have the intellectual ability to become good, even outstanding, college students. But that’s a side of them in which the universities have shown no interest. It is certainly not the side that is rewarded and developed. Worse yet, many disadvantaged black youths who

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are merely smart, but without any athletic gift, do not go to college at all. There has been a lot of empty rhetoric about “institutional racism.” Here is the real thing, and it is conveniently ignored.

Many college administrators contend that more should be done to “close the gap.” But as long as college sports is big business generating extraordinary sums of money, academic standards will be compromised for winning teams. The controversy surrounding the imposition of Proposition 48, which forced Division I athletes to meet minimum—very minimum—core curriculum, grade point average, and test performance standards suggests that most schools will subvert Proposition 48’s intent in one way or another.

Similarly, the NCAA’s plans to release graduation rates by race on a college-by-college basis will result in schools pushing athletes through regardless of their academic performance. Rudy Davalos, director of athletics at the University of Houston, which graduated just one of forty-nine black male athletes who entered as freshmen, has said, “The NCAA rules that have come into play have made a big difference, and the rates are going to be better.” That may be true, but Mr. Davalos does not indicate at what price.

As the recent Olympics shows, the distinction between amateur and professional athlete is now hopelessly blurred. Perhaps a similar blurring among Division I athletic programs could have a salutary effect on degree requirements. Instead of vitiating degree standards to accommodate athletes, big-time sports programs should be disentangled from colleges.

Let those who wish to play big-time sports become semiprofessionals attached in a contractual way to colleges. Let colleges charge for the use of their football field and gymnasium. And let academic programs retain their integrity without any concession to athletes.

If this proposal were adopted, the disparity in graduation rates would become irrelevant. There would be no need for congressional oversight of big-time college sports. There would be no need for athletic scholarships. There would be no need for compromising admission or graduation requirements. The adoption of this recommendation would eliminate the cynicism that now surrounds student athletes and their “academic” programs. And, finally, we would be able to address more honestly our responsibility to provide quality higher education to black Americans.