

# Athletics Recruiting and Academic Values: Enhancing Transparency, Spreading Risk, and Improving Practice

Roundtable on Intercollegiate Athletics and Higher Education  
University of Georgia  
Institute of Higher Education

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Universities and even some colleges can seem to exist in different worlds from their athletics programs, particularly at institutions where some sports attract broad outside interest. Nevertheless, contexts and interests appear to diverge considerably more than they actually do.

Institutions and athletics do differ in their means of recruiting students, for instance. They should not and need not differ in the values associated with the admissions process, however.

Admissions offices market institutions broadly to the types of high school students they wish to attract – a relatively imprecise but typically necessary approach. In contrast, coaches identify a small cluster of prospective student-athletes and track them relentlessly, often beginning as early as junior high school. This occurs not only in Division I sports, but also increasingly across the 1,700 universities and colleges that sponsor varsity programs.

A regular cause for concern is when the rest of the university community has little contact with

prospective student-athletes until late in the recruiting and admissions process. The interests of both recruited student-athletes and the institutions they attend are better served when recruiting is grounded in the full admissions process. In many cases, coaches and athletics departments should be applauded for attracting student-athletes, particularly those from substandard high schools and impoverished backgrounds, who graduate with the solid education all should expect. However, especially in football and basketball programs at

larger institutions, student-athletes too often come to college underprepared for, and uninterested in, the academic work required of them. Coaches have powerful incentives, namely better teams and the bigger paychecks that accompany them, to recruit student-athletes who may turn out to be a poor fit for their institutions, whether academically or otherwise. Institutions more broadly can have the same incentives to “do whatever it takes” to achieve success in college sports.

In late August, the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia assembled 20 presidents, athletics directors, campus and conference administrators, and leading scholars writing on intercollegiate athletics for a day-long discussion of the challenges associated with athletics recruiting. The roundtable focused on framing issues in recruiting student-athletes in the context of the entire university. We worked from the prospect that trends and challenges

across higher education parallel and thus can inform and be informed by those in intercollegiate athletics, concluding that positive change in areas such as athletics recruiting cannot occur if it is considered in isolation from the whole of university communities. The recruitment

and admission of student-athletes must be grounded in the principles of academe – and it must involve faculty and academic administrators in meaningful ways.

We thus explore the athletics recruiting and admissions process with a view toward reconceptualizing it, advancing an approach that improves practice through spreading the risks associated with recruiting and admissions across universities as a whole by enhancing transparency in the process. By more formally

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and completely involving the entire university community in recruiting student-athletes, we suggest a means of counterbalancing the negative incentives and poor decisions that too often define what fundamentally must be a legitimate admissions process.

Academic administrators and faculty members must be involved directly in the recruiting process from beginning to end. Such an approach will move them beyond the stereotypes and vague laments that so many believe about college sports, perhaps even toward welcoming – and even taking credit for – competitive successes by athletes who are also bona fide students. Meanwhile, it requires those in athletics to work transparently within the university. They must internalize academic values, embracing them even when inconvenient, if they are to retain the mantle of education that distinguishes college sports from purely professional endeavors.

## **A Needless Divide**

Troubles associated with recruiting are attributable to the divide that has long been perceived between academics and athletics – a divide that not only is unnecessary but also is counterproductive and even dangerous for institutions.

Once again, contexts and interests between academe and athletics appear to diverge much more than they actually do. The increasing pressures toward commercialism and professionalism in athletics are mirrored throughout the academy. The pressures to depart from traditional academic values are quite similar to the incentives to dilute the collegiate ideal in athletics. The problems that increasing commercialism and professionalism have wrought in athletics are well documented. Athletics directors are exhibiting ever-greater creativity in scheduling football games to earn larger television fees; entering into partnerships with apparel companies and other sponsors; selling suites choice tickets to donors; and so on.

Meanwhile, as costs escalate and appropriations dwindle, universities are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial in the academic programs and student amenities they offer. Just as there is an arms race to construct

flashy athletic facilities in the interest of attracting recruits, for instance, institutions are building luxurious dining commons, student residences, fitness centers, and even shopping districts in the interest of recruiting students. Similarly, the sense of entitlement associated with student-athletes extends increasingly to students generally, especially among those academic stars aggressively recruited through attractive funding packages into honors programs. The robust attempts to attract notable faculty to drive institutional prestige are similar.

Furthermore, a consequence of the intensifying recruiting market in both academe and athletics is an increase in misplaced expectations. Just as international students recruited to compete in intercollegiate athletics can be unclear about the nature of the U.S. approach, the graduate students admitted from abroad to help sustain the research enterprise can arrive to find a situation they fundamentally did not anticipate. Institutions increasingly see students as commodities bought on a market – a characteristic those in academe commonly associate with athletics recruiting.

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Such parallels should be obvious to those in both academe and athletics. But people in the two areas rarely work jointly on shared issues, much less draw on the experience of the other to improve practice. As a result, too few academic leaders understand college sports, and athletic leaders commonly do not appreciate academe. Both sides criticize the other without really knowing the contexts in which the other operates, and neither recognizes that trends and issues in both academe and athletics are often more alike than they are different.

This fundamental misunderstanding is a lost opportunity and a source of serious problems. The crises in athletics that can prove burdensome to university administrations are often attributable to a failure by athletics to comprehend the values and mores of academic life. Similarly, colleagues in academe must come to understand the realities of contemporary intercollegiate athletics, and recognize that calls for reform in areas like recruiting must be realistic. Just as “turning back the clock” to a time of abundant state subsidies to institutions with little demand for accountability is unrealistic, so is restoring athletics to some golden age that never existed free from commercialism and professionalism.

The values asserted in discussing reform in intercollegiate athletics must acknowledge the commercial contexts in which institutions as a whole operate – that athletics at large universities are consistent with how these institutions engage in several other activities that are expected to generate revenue. Such activities must also be grounded in academic values, of course. Student-athletes thus must be both students and athletes, including in how they are recruited and admitted. Building the understanding of academic values needed by those in athletics, and the appreciation of contexts in athletics by those in academe, requires structural and cultural means to encourage regular interaction between the two.

## **Transparency Through Involvement**

Recognizing these needed connections suggests a broad principle that can reframe how we across higher education view recruiting: transparency through involvement. Reforming recruiting requires “spreading the risk” across institutions by increasing transparency in the process, involving more people in more meaningful ways, particularly academic administrators and faculty working in partnership with coaches and athletic administrators.

Athletics recruiting and admissions are a natural and crucial place to begin building and institutionalizing interactions between academe and athletics. An interest in involving the entire university or college community in athletes recruiting cannot be limited to mitigating the potential for embarrassment or the compact that

institutions have with the NCAA to hold student-athletes to the same requirements (and hopefully expectations) as all students. It must also be grounded in recognizing the particular responsibilities that institutions have toward student-athletes, especially when they are primarily recruited as athletes and given the specific pressures associated with participation in intercollegiate athletics. The goal should be the same as in all admissions decisions: to maximize the possibility of a good fit between student and institutions, creating a satisfying result for all involved.

**Operating in a Vacuum.** Why are athletes and coaches so often making poor judgments that lead to familiar headlines about embarrassingly low retention rates and a class of students divorced from institutional life apart from their role as athletes? The answer is usually that the recruitment and admission of student-athletes occurs in a vacuum, with coaches and prospective student-athletes making decisions without needed involvement of faculty, academic administrators, or even campus admissions officers.

Coaches are forced to work within a deeply flawed system with increasingly high stakes. They are limited by well meaning NCAA rules in the contacts they can have with recruited athletes and thus the information they can provide to guide them to a good decision. Recruited athletes too often choose an institution with only a vague awareness of not only the approach of their soon-to-be coach and nature of his or her team, but also the academic and social environment on campus. For instance, the summer recruiting tournaments, which were created in response to rules imposed to prevent basketball coaches from becoming nuisances to the most desirable recruits, require that coaches watch from the bleachers and not interact directly with the athletes. Thus they lose the opportunity to provide the good counsel that is critical in any admissions process – a classic unintended consequence of rulemaking by member institutions rightly acting to temper undue competitive pressures.

Furthermore, recruiting has become a fixation for coaches. They identify prospective athletes early in high school (or even before then), communicating with them obsessively. NCAA

rules limiting such contact are subject to loopholes that are exploited, as with coaches discovering text messaging as a means around restrictions on telephone calls or sending e-mail messages. Recruited athletes are receiving these contacts well before they set foot on a campus and are aware of the challenges associated with attending a university or college.

It only heightens the challenges that coaches have strong incentives to have athletes commit to attending an institution as early as possible, often on the first day of contact the NCAA permits between coaches and athletes. Recruited athletes can thus experience a truncated admissions process, shortchanging the usual process by which students get to know institutions (and themselves) and institutions get to know them before committing to one another. Both are assuming significant risk without exercising sufficient due diligence.

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Exacerbating the problem is the fact that athletes and their parents, particularly in the most prominent sports, are getting poor counsel from various informal yet influential “brokers” who serve as intermediaries between prospective athletes and intercollegiate programs. For the elite athletes recruited to play college sports, scholastic teams have diminished in stature and club teams have increased in influence. These club teams and their coaches have little, if any, interest in the academic life of athletes beyond their eligibility under NCAA admissions restrictions, and sometimes not even that. Recent reporting has uncovered bogus transcripts created by sham high schools established to enable the least academically prepared athletes to qualify for intercollegiate participation, gaming the system and making a mockery of academic values.

Like club coaches and informal “advisors,” the media are another form of intermediary that shapes decisions by athletes. The mainstream media have come to regard recruiting as part of their regular coverage of college sports (although they often contract out the actual reporting to employees of the websites). In addition, over the past decade, innumerable websites have emerged to track recruiting rumors. Those maintaining recruiting websites are in nearly continuous contact with top recruits, particularly because NCAA rules forbid college officials from commenting publicly on recruits prior to their formal commitment to a given institution. The constant pressure and incessant attention from these websites furthers the disconnectedness and misplaced expectations of these athletes.

Parents also can be focused more on athletic dreams than on academic realities, pressuring their children and coaches to pursue paths that may not be ideal for anyone involved. This is not unlike the private admissions consultants who are increasingly involved with wealthy students applying to elite institutions or the “helicopter parents” who meddle in the daily affairs of their children once they arrive on campus. Just as parents often begin worrying about the college choice of their children even before middle school, athletes also often grow up in a limited culture, one that constantly reinforces the idea that sports is the only route to college or any other success. Particularly in basketball, but also in the Olympic sports like swimming and golf, athletes are increasingly the product of youth sports programs that are rapidly commercializing and divorced from academic values, overpreparing them athletically and underpreparing them in other respects.

Institutions, whether acting alone or collectively, can hardly limit the influence of sports-fixated parents, recruiting gurus, club coaches, informal advisors, and even their own coaches. It can be impractical or impossible to directly punish those involved in the recruiting process. Even dismissing the most shameless coaches can be of limited utility, as there is no guarantee that they will not be hired elsewhere. In part, this is because institutions rarely disclose the practices that lead to a dismissal, affording another institution some measure of deniability. The perceived need to hire a proven winner is

too often great, regardless of his or her past. Ensuring integrity in the recruiting process then is less a matter of applying more rules and much more an issue of ensuring that values are clarified and applied. The only reasonable way to do so is through the transparency that comes with involving the entire academic community in the recruiting process.

Institutions effectively ask coaches alone to paint a picture of what life as a college student at their institution will be like. Thus when these recruited athletes arrive on campus, especially in the spectator sports, their impressions of the university have often been shaped only by the one football or basketball game weekend on which they made a recruiting visit, plus constant but long distance communications with coaches. They may have little, if any, sense of the realities of managing a full load of courses while practicing, traveling, and competing. And they may have had only cursory, if any, contact with faculty members, “regular” admissions counselors and academic advisors, or even students other than those associated with teams.

Coaches, then, expect academic advisors employed by athletics departments to pick up the pieces once they arrive, teaching athletes, as best they can, to be college students. What results from the vacuum in recruiting and the differences in preparation between recruits and other freshmen is that athletes are increasingly disconnected from other students.

In American higher education, we extend great autonomy and deference to faculty, trusting they will operate in accord with a recognized set of values. We tend to treat coaches in the opposite manner, charging an external agency, the NCAA, with generating rules (that are often soon outdated no matter how well crafted) to attempt to restrict them into ethical behavior. Coaches tend to argue, perhaps rightly, that we are missing an opportunity here. They are possibly the most effective evaluators on campus of the character of students with whom they choose to work – who they are as well as what they know. Theirs is a particularly relevant ability as universities are increasingly interested in fostering and measuring nonacademic outcomes, but with limited tools available to them.

But a model based on increased trust in and autonomy for coaches, and away from a mentality of seeking loopholes, requires that coaches internalize the academic values that they will need to champion and protect. It demands regular and deep connections with the academic community. And that is possible only when academic administrators and faculty members become real partners in the recruiting process, involved in its many facets from beginning to end, and seeing coaches as colleagues in a common endeavor, rather than as agents of an activity that is outside the larger admissions process.

**Serving Underrepresented Students.** It is important to remember that the majority of student athletes are not underprepared for higher education. But low-achieving students from marginal, under-resourced high schools rarely matriculate at flagship universities unless they happen to be athletes. Many blue-chip athletes come from white-chip backgrounds, from low-income areas and inner city high schools that continue to struggle to prepare students for postsecondary education. Meanwhile, NCAA eligibility standards, with the best of intentions, have moved from standardized tests (which may, in fact, be problematic due to socioeconomic bias) to high school grades and core courses, making it more difficult to identify at-risk students, and opening the door to the kind of fraud seen in the diploma mill scandal.

Student-athletes recruited for the spectator sports also are predominantly African-Americans entering a university environment primarily shaped and populated by whites. Roughly one-quarter of Division I scholarship athletes – and an even higher proportion in the spectator sports (over one-half) – are African-American, compared to about one-tenth of students overall at Division I institutions. So, institutions deeply concerned about expanding access and opportunity to underrepresented students might look to athletics as a model. The question then becomes whether these student-athletes, having been admitted, are receiving the experience that they should as students. Are universities and colleges doing right by them? The same question applies, of course, to all students admitted from underrepresented groups, particularly when

admissions criteria incorporate the racial and ethnic balance of an entering class.

Here exists an important opportunity for a regular and deep conversation bridging academe and athletics. Universities have been successful in introducing underrepresented students to academic opportunities through intensive preparatory experiences, such as in-residence academic programs, during the summer prior to the freshman year.

Athletics might emulate this approach by having recruited student-athletes learn the realities of being a college student before their first fall semester in environments divorced from their status as athletes. Doing so would be a departure from the common model of using pre-freshman summer school as a chance to begin team-building and the transition only to being an athlete.

Those on the academic side of institutions can similarly learn from the intensive academic advising, often using a “tough love” approach, invested in athletics. These approaches tend to yield dividends. At most institutions, despite lower test scores and high school grades, football and basketball teams have higher graduation rates for African-American players than the overall student body.

**Resources and Values.** Any approach to reforming recruiting must recognize the external pressures on colleges to produce winning teams. It is not only coaches and athletics administrators who have powerful incentives to cut corners. It is difficult for institutions to say “no” to those who provide funding – and are interested in wins and losses.

Institutions must constantly reconcile their values with increasing revenue needs. In fact, given the evolving funding landscape, it is not always clear what our values are in higher education. Both academic and athletic officials recognize that they call their legitimacy into question when they do not balance traditional academic values with commercial and professional impulses, but identifying the line between the two can be particularly challenging. It is especially so given the assumption by outsiders that the business model is naturally the right one in higher education – the too common misperception that higher education

and intercollegiate athletics would be better if it were only “run more like a business.”

No one in higher education knows better what it means to be run like a business than athletics administrators and coaches. Coaches in the spectator sports, in particular, are rewarded handsomely, and evaluated directly and tangibly based on the wins and losses that are analogous to profits and losses in the corporate

sector. In addition, coaches in other sports are likely to be called into question for

poor won-lost records, even if they consistently have athletes who excel as students. Such trends are prevalent not only in Division I, but also increasingly across the other divisions. Athletics directors are expected to operate in a corporate model, with significant pressure to generate revenue. Within such a model, there are incentives to look past questionable activities by coaches and others, particularly when the perception is that such practices are connected with desired outcomes such as winning.

Recruiting in college sports is a classic example of the tension inherent between educational ideals and universities deeply engaged in worldly affairs. Indeed, it is fair to say that too many coaches and even athletic directors understand commercial realities better than they appreciate the values of the university or academic culture. They are, after all, too often divorced from the mainstream of campus, rarely interacting with faculty or even deans.

But it is equally fair to note that faculty members fail to adequately recognize the commercial pressures that are the reality in contemporary higher education. Perhaps this is why they seem content with keeping athletics “over there” as a means to avoid confronting the commercial realities that are increasingly part of their realm, and that can so conflict with the “amateur” ideals manifested in traditional academic values. Faculty also commonly get their information about college sports on their campus secondhand, including through the news media, and thus have a not particularly nuanced understanding of the enterprise.

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Additionally, universities are less collegial than ever, with faculty less invested in institutional life, less involved in governance, and even less connected to a given campus. They understand increasingly less about their institution, including its commitment to athletics.

Senior administrators also are comfortable with compartmentalizing athletics, perhaps as a means to placate faculty or as a strategy to reduce the risk that comes with operating a commercial venture such as spectator sports in an environment that is still guided by not-for-profit principles.

Administrative structures tend to isolate athletics, with departments reporting directly to presidents instead of being part of the exchange among members of a cabinet that can broaden the perspectives of the administrators involved.

Senior administrators in higher education can also become overly enamored with commercial realities, as with the quest to serve new markets through academic programs grounded in student convenience. There is also an obsession across higher education with expanding institutional missions to include more activities deemed to be prestigious, such as enhancing graduate programs and research or “going Division I” in sports, even when such activities challenge traditional academic values or are of questionable financial viability. The desires for greater prestige and expanding revenue can lead to decisions related to athletics that run counter to accepted norms and values in academe.

In addition, it is common in athletics and in increasingly higher education to look outside for enforcement of these fundamental values. The NCAA assumes the watchdog role in college athletics. And institutions are now trading some measure of autonomy in exchange for promises of resources linked with greater accountability to the state and others. Indeed, some measure of collective responsibility is necessary in athletics, as in higher education generally, given the limits inherent in self-policing. But institutional responsibility and personal

accountability are much more crucial, as there are always gaps between rules and thus slippage in realizing their intent.

Applying values can never be only a matter of rulemaking. It must also come from a community effort on campus, involving multiple perspectives with the understanding that there will be differences in orientation and approach, but that resulting compromises will be productive. Having the university as a whole involved in athletics recruiting creates a system of checks and balances. It counteracts

weakness associated with various constituencies – isolated coaches, naïve faculty, unfocused administrators – keeping everyone, in effect, intellectually honest and transparent in practice.

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Doing so takes advantage of the great strength across our institutions, in both academe and athletics in that people tend to work hard at their jobs, care about their institutions, and fundamentally want to do what is right. There are far more examples in recruiting of good apples than bad ones, but the bad ones tend to spoil the whole bunch when it comes to how athletics is broadly perceived.

## **An Illustrative Approach**

There is no one approach, of course, to realizing the broader and deeper involvement by the entire university or college community in athletics recruiting that will assure academic values enter into the process from beginning to end. But every institution can find a structure that will be effective within its own organizational culture and regular academic and admissions processes.

One potential model to consider is currently in use at the University of Oklahoma. For the past four years, the athletics department has invited an academic review committee to consider the application of every marginal, or at-risk, recruited athlete. The committee consists of the senior associate athletics director, who also reports to the provost, as well as the faculty athletics representative and several other faculty members named through the faculty

senate. The committee has the authority to interview anyone involved in the recruiting of any student-athlete, usually choosing the head coach of the team involved. The coach must offer an acceptable justification for admitting the recruit and, at least in theory, the conversation happens well in advance of the national signing date for the sport in question.

The committee rarely rejects prospects. What matters is that the process itself brings sunshine to recruiting and forces consideration of the relevant issues in admitting a student-athlete by both coaches and the faculty involved. The approach compels coaches to consider whether each athlete he or she recruits is a good fit for the institution, highlighting potential conflicts early and avoiding certain challenging decisions as coaches drop the most marginal cases from consideration.

Meanwhile, faculty come to know the depth of review undertaken by the coaches into the background of recruited athletes and appreciate the art involved in

interpreting transcripts, particularly for prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They also bring their expertise to bear on the ultimate question in recruiting and admissions: what constitutes an acceptable gap between the academic preparation of recruited athletes versus other students. Another advantage is that faculty members and academic administrators educate coaches about the academic demands athletes will confront once enrolled, thus creating an important dialogue about the kind of athlete who can succeed best at a given university or college.<sup>1</sup>

By involving faculty in meaningful ways in the recruiting process, the university is thus encouraging a common set of values and practices, moving athletics toward academic values and academe toward a more realistic outlook. In doing so, the impulse to cut corners is lessened. The same is true integrating

<sup>1</sup> Oklahoma also completes background checks on all prospects before the national signing date. Beyond recruiting, Oklahoma is also implementing its own continuing eligibility standards, moving beyond NCAA limits.

athletics recruiting into the overall admissions process of institutions, thus reinforcing the idea that athletes are being recruited to a university and not to a coach or program, while providing opportunities to educate parents and students about the opportunities and responsibilities they will encounter on campus.

Other institutions have similar plans and some conferences have policies that apply to all members. The Ivy League, for example, has a model of admissions standards in football and one for other sports in use at each institution, and shares selected admissions data among its members to reduce rumors about admissions and to promote a sense of competitive equity and common commitment. The Southeastern Conference is considering a plan for league-wide review committees for athletes with warning signs in their personal histories, such as attending multiple high schools.

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The conference plans highlight the fact that institutions exist with great autonomy within a highly competitive environment, as do their athletics programs. But it is also one with a

degree of cooperation among competitors who often share challenges. Such is certainly the case in athletics recruiting. Universities, like organizations generally, are loath to act unilaterally when it is possible that they will put themselves at a disadvantage relative to their competitors. Asserting institutional values into the athletics recruiting process is a much less compelling prospect when competitors are thought to be acting differently. Fortunately, athletics is organized into consortia of like institutions. These conferences can encourage their members to adopt an approach like the one we discuss above that moves toward transparency through involvement.

Beyond college campuses, and more difficult to address, is the fact that the culture of youth sports is increasingly problematic. Youth sports are becoming more and more commercialized and parental pressure and investment in a child getting a scholarship has never been greater. The dominant signals to these children are that sports are more important than academic



preparation – academics require only the attention needed to remain eligible to compete.

There is also a divide that increasingly occurs between athletes and others, a notion that athletes are special, subject to different rules from their peers and exempt from normal requirements. The recruiting process only intensifies this perception, thanks to the need coaches feel to court athletes so intensively and even sycophantically. Elite athletes come to thus expect the recruiting process extend into their time in college, do not take school seriously in high school, and come to college unprepared magnifying the disadvantages they already face. There is clearly a need for a national discussion of how to better communicate the realities of academe to the youth sports culture.

## Moving Forward

Recognizing the connections between trends and issues in athletics recruiting and admissions, and those in higher education overall, suggests the broad principle of transparency through involvement. Reframing how we view recruiting provides the platform needed for real reform. Reforming recruiting must spread the risk across the university by increasing transparency in the process. It must involve more people in more meaningful ways, particularly academic administrators and faculty working in partnership with coaches and athletics administrators.

Through the roundtable and this essay, we hope to provoke thought and discussion by reframing what have become rather predictable debates. Our goal is to ground challenges related to athletics in the values, purposes, and realities of academe. And it is, ultimately, to prompt action. In choosing recruiting as our first topic in what we hope are several discussions of various issues in athletics, we seek to give higher education institutions a clearer sense of how to integrate the admissions of athletes into overall academic life.

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Only through reframing these debates can we move forward toward more fully integrating athletics into academe. There are venues to consider athletics and there are places to consider higher education, but there is no space for regular conversations that bridge both worlds. Our work here seeks to provide that space. We illustrate these connections and their potential to improve policy and practice here through a discussion of recruiting. Once again, our essay is the product of what we hope is the first of a series of roundtable discussions on significant trends in intercollegiate athletics and higher education – sports in the context of education.

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## Participants

The August 20-21 roundtable discussion in Atlanta included 19 participants with insights into the connections between academe and athletics in the recruiting of student-athletes – presidents, athletic directors and administrators, conference officials, coaches, university administrators, and leading scholars.

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