**Sports in Selective College Admissions**

\**The NCAA creates the first football national championship playoff, delighting fans and providing a huge financial windfall for big athletic conferences and ESPN.*

*\*Jim Harbaugh, former San Francisco Forty Niners coach returns to his alma mater Michigan, which is in the midst of a cost cutting campaign, to try and turn around the football program in return for a 7-year contract for a base pay of $5 million/year, with incentives that could add up to $48 million.*

*\* The highest paid state employee in 40 states is either the men's basketball or football coach.*

*\*Former Solicitor General Ken Starr resigned as the president of Baylor, and then resigned his faculty appointment. When he took over as president, Starr bought into the idea that nationally competitive sports can improve a school’s reputation, increase applications and lead to more donations. Or as he said in 2014, “Success in athletics means that all boats rise.” Then an investigation found that 19 football players had been accused of sexual assault by 17 women and that the coach had been aware of the problems and hadn’t reported them as required. The investigation lead to Starr, the football coach, and the athletic director losing their jobs.*

*\*Harvard asks my private high school to let them take a student after his junior year because they wanted him to play hockey with his two brothers, hockey stars at Harvard, who were going into their senior year. I read about the three brothers in the Harvard Alumni magazine and it didn’t make sense, since I knew the younger brother was too young to be on the same team as his brothers. I talked to an old teacher of mine who confirmed that Harvard wanted him a year early, the school agreed, so he skipped his senior year.*

*\*A year later the son of a close friend, a superb lightweight rower, is given a “likely” letter, effectively guaranteeing him early admission from Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and Princeton, a year after his sister, with the same academic record from the same high school, even better test scores, and an extensive artistic resume, was rejected from every Ivy League school she applied to.*

*\*An old high school friend posts on his Facebook feed on October 14th that his nephew, a senior rower from Andover, was given a likely letter from Harvard., even though the deadline for early applications is November 1 and they don’t officially inform applicants until mid-December. Ivy league schools use likely letters, which basically say that it’s almost certain that they will let you in, to better compete for good athletes who are attracted by Division I schools like Stanford and Notre Dame that can offer full athletic scholarships.*

*\*A headmaster at a well-respected Massachusetts boarding school reports that the Princeton coach told a very good lacrosse player at his prep school that they would admit her when she applied, although she had just completed her sophomore year. While they can’t officially offer her admission, the headmaster says that in his experience these kids who are told by college coaches that they’ll get in early in their high school career always have gotten in.*

*\*A friend’s daughter, a superb hockey player from Montana, applies to several elite eastern prep schools with great sports programs, and was eagerly pursued by two of them. Although prohibited from giving outright scholarships, the schools entered into a kind of bidding war to get her to attend. Both gave generous financial aid. One offered three free round-trip plane tickets a year, the other countered with free violin lessons and an expensive laptop*. *The tuition at these boarding schools is a little over $56,000/year.*

*\*An old high school classmate quit the board of our alma mater, a private Episcopal boy’s school in Connecticut that has become a sports factory because he was upset that they used most of their financial aid budget on the lacrosse team. It was always difficult for this second-tier private school to get students into the most selective schools. And like many other private boarding schools, who are trying to adapt to an admissions world where their students aren’t coveted by the most selective schools, they’ve realized that having superb sports teams increases the chances that their students will get into a Brown, Yale, or .*

*\*In 2016, Harvard suspended its men’s soccer team, leading the Ivy League at the time, for the remaining four games of the season. Administrators took action upon discovering an online document in 2012 where the male soccer players rated the looks and sexual appeal of Harvard women soccer players in what they called a scouting report. The men gave each woman a numerical ranking and assigned each of them a hypothetical sexual position. The young men kept updating the Google document through 2016.*

What’s going on here?

 Welcome to the strange world of athletics at US colleges, where, unlike any other country in the world, sports teams, most notably football and basketball teams, are often the most important institutional priority, or at least the most expensive. Admission to top universities in other countries usually depends on grades and/or test scores only. No other country has knit sports so closely into the fabric of their higher education programs. While students play sports in other countries, they are more akin to the intramural programs run by American institutions.

And it’s not just the big division I teams such as Ohio State, Michigan, and Alabama. The institutional preference given to athletes in the admission process at many of our most elite schools, from Harvard to Stanford to Williams, is weighted more heavily than any other extra-curricular activity and race, social and economic status, or legacy preferences. In addition, many of our most highly ranked schools spend four or five times as much on each athlete as compared to their non-athletic peers. Institutions show how much they value having good sports teams in their admissions process and by *spending considerably more money on athletes.*

Ironically, the biggest jock schools by percentage of total students in the US are not schools with nationally competitive Division I teams, such as UCLA and Alabama. The biggest jock schools are Stanford, the Ivy League schools, and some of our most elite Division III teams like Williams and Amherst.

How this strange system evolved is the subject of this book. The conflict between the increasingly professional and commercial nature of college sports, the demands of Title IX (which requires equal opportunities for women) and the high institutional expenses of the recent push to find promising lower income students and increase STEM offerings (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), will be almost impossible to reconcile with the mission statements of these US colleges.

The story of why US colleges value sports so much begins, fittingly enough, with policies developed in England. Most early US colleges were founded to train religious leaders, and many of the professors and administrators had attended or been heavily influenced by Oxford (founded 1167) and Cambridge (founded 1209). England was the first European sporting nation. In the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, Oxford and Cambridge students participated in boating, cricket, horse racing, hunting, tennis, lawn bowling, boxing, cock-fighting and cudgel-playing. Cricket, then rowing, were the first team sports and the first Oxford/Cambridge cricket match took place in 1827, followed by the first rowing race in 1829. Early English sports reflected the elite nature of English higher education. While over 100,000 people would watch the annual rowing race, the rowers were overwhelmingly upper class and happy to compete against their peers to demonstrate that they were physically fit to lead, but still gentlemen. In the 1800s students at Harvard, Yale and other US colleges began to engage in sports.

But there were crucial differences between the elite English class structure and the more free-wheeling and less stratified American culture in the 1800s that quickly changed how sports developed at schools in the US. The English sons of the upper crust relished the opportunity to show that they were physically fit on the water or playing fields. They were confident they would be the new ruling class, and part of that was proving their manliness on the playing field. But the rigid class structure ensured that intercollegiate athletic contests didn’t spread much beyond the elite schools.

In contrast, after the revolutionary war, US students began to push back against administrations that they considered too rigid. Students began developing extra-curricular activities, ranging from literary societies, to fraternities, to debating clubs, to sports.

American schools had also imported the English upper-class traditions of hazing and fagging, which in turn affected how sports developed. New Harvard and Yale freshmen were forced to do chores for upper classmen- heat water for tea, keep fires stoked and clearing out ashes, among other menial jobs. A tradition of rushing, where students who sat in daily chapel by class groups would basically fight to pass other grades that were seated closer to the door led to class-wide competitions where students wrestled to establish dominance. In turn, students began competing in a game, later developed into football as we now know it, that was basically a melee with violent kicking of a ball. Every fall, Harvard students looked forward to the annual sophomore/freshman game that was fondly called “Bloody Monday.”

Sports quickly became the most important extra-curricular activity and were completely run by students, who created rules, and set up competitions, by themselves. Competing wasn’t enough for American college students—they wanted to win. This led to the hiring of professional coaches and other efforts to professionalize athletics. From the very beginning, sports in colleges was a commercial venture.

As American students developed organized sports they wanted to compete with other schools.

Athletics also came to be supported by administrators who placed great importance in being more than just smart. The schools’ mission was to create leaders, and those leaders had to be tough physically. This philosophy is perhaps best exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt, who believed that physical fitness was as important as mental acuity. By the late 1800s, Ivy League football, the best in the country, was the most important sport. Admissions officers made sure to admit enough strapping young men to field good teams. They expressly limited the number of “eggheads” and “brains”, and put greater weight on character exhibited by “manliness”. Having some nerdy smart men was okay, just not too many of them.

Athletics then, came to serve a special purpose for the colleges, and today athletes at all schools, including many of the most selective, cost the institutions far more per student than non-athletes. Other extra-curricular activities organized by students pushing back against the rigid and boring academic structure, such as debate clubs, music, and literary clubs were eventually merged into the academic structure in places such as the English and Music departments. Over time, only athletics was kept separate.

**Admissions System**

The modern admission system used by most colleges evolved from the first East Coast private high schools founded in the late 1800s on the principles of British boarding schools, which were designed to toughen up the children of the ruling elite so that they could become great leaders. These private boarding schools, along with the evaluation system developed for the Rhodes Scholarships, were used as models to allow admissions officers to move away from test-based systems administered in Latin and Greek to a more flexible approach where grades and test scores could be considered, but so could more subjective qualities such as character. After all, they were educating future leaders, who would have to have more than just book smarts. The term for this is called “holistic” admissions. And athleticism has always been considered to be a very desirable character trait, and often viewed much more positively than being a good student or any other extra-curricular activity.

The legacy of valuing physical attributes in admissions very much continues to this day. Being on a coaches list at some of our most elite colleges has become the single factor that improves the odds of admission significantly more than being a high achieving minority, a legacy, or any other extra-curricular activity.

The holistic system has given the colleges great power to control what their classes look like, in both positive and negative ways. Even if a school like Harvard could rank the top 2,000 applicants, they wouldn’t admit them all. Harvard wants to build the overall class that they would like—a class distinguished by academic achievement, to be sure, but also geographic diversity, racial diversity, artistic ability, and good sports teams. Sometimes the number of admitted students from groups of applicants with very good grades and test scores have been kept down.

Schools have also been able to use this holistic system to change their admissions policies in response to pressure exerted by outside forces, such as public opinion, alumni pressure, or social forces. In the first few decades of the 1900s, the schools that would become the Ivy League actively tried to limit the number of Jews who were admitted. During the civil rights protests of the 1970s, colleges quickly increased the number of minorities and women. In the 2000s, the schools began to try and increase the number of students who would be the first in their families to attend college. A group of Asian American students sued Harvard in 2014 for what they say is a pattern of discrimination against them. State schools can be pressured to change admissions policies by political pressure. In 2015, the University of California system, which like all states has been dealing with declining state funding, came under pressure for admitting fewer California students who paid lower in-state tuition and admitting more foreign and out of state students who paid more. Public outcry from California residents and political pressure worked— in 2016 the university system vowed to increase the number of in state slots.

Colleges are required by Title IX to provide equal opportunity for women, including varsity athletic slots. If you have a men’s football team of 120 and a lacrosse team of almost 50, you need a number of women’s sports to match that number. At the big state schools, the number of scholarship athletes is very low on a percentage basis. Ohio State athletes in 36 varsity teams make up 2.9% of the student body of 52,000. Stanford has 35 varsity sports whose members make up 13% of the undergraduate student body of 6,532. There are some division one schools, such as the Ivy League, that do not offer athletic scholarships, but prioritize athletic programs. Harvard fields 42 varsity teams, the most of any US school and fought the recent changes in football policy that reduced the number of football slots from 35 to 30. Harvard athletes make up 18.5% of the undergraduate student body of 10,338. Many division I and II schools also want robust athletic programs. Middlebury, which competes in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), has a student body of 2,526, with 34.4% participating on 31 varsity teams. (These statistics are from Forbes magazine, collated from Department of Education data from 2015-16. These statistics are slightly higher than what the non-scholarship schools report on their websites.) These athlete numbers are higher than the number of recruited athletes on coaches lists for the non-scholarship schools. For example, recruited athletes make up somewhere between 11-13% of the Ivy League schools. This discrepancy is most likely a result of sports such as rowing, where a number of walk on athletes compete, usually for one of the lower boats. In addition, there are probably athletes with excellent grades and test scores who are good enough to make the teams, but not good enough for the coach to put on their coaches lists.

The institutional preference for athletics in and of itself can be debated. Certainly athletics can teach valuable lessons that can be applied to life after school. However, there are also problems with the culture of athletics that some argue can work against norms of behavior, possibly increasing the number of sexual assaults. One thing is certain—the athletic preference to our top schools has encouraged parents and high schools to put more and more emphasis on sports as a way for their kids to get in. This sports emphasis has combined with the massive amount of money that’s washed over the sports world since the first big tv sports broadcasting deals to create an environment that has changed youth and high school sports. These changes are time consuming, expensive, and force young athletes to specialize in one sport at very young age, rasing the risk of injury.

**School Athletics and Big Money**

There have been numerous books and articles written about the deep problems in college athletics in the big Division I schools that regularly vie for national championships. Academic violations, confusing rules and decisions from the NCAA, covering up sexual abuse and other crimes perpetrated by athletes and coaches, illegally paying recruits, low graduation rates, and the relatively new phenomenon of top high school basketball players coming to play one year for teams like Duke and Kentucky are all issues for the scholarship colleges. These problems are inevitable, because from the very first rowing race between Harvard and Yale in 1852, which was conceived, organized, and funded by a railroad magnate eager to promote his new railroad line through New Hampshire, college sports have been strikingly economic in nature.

Creating an excellent athletic program costs. Athletic departments are huge at any school with robust programs. Recruits want to see state of the art training facilities, and good coaching is expensive. Travel is often by charter plane and equipment and no expense can be spared to ensure superb playing fields and arenas. Schools in what are known as the big five athletic conferences (the Big 12, the Big 10, the SEC, the ACC, the Pac-12) bring in tens of millions of dollars in shared television revenue per year to help pay for these expenses. They also benefit corporate sponsorship including huge apparel deals. While the Ivy League and some division II and III schools get some revenue from their teams, it’s a fraction of the income enjoyed by the big-time football and basketball teams, so athletic costs far exceed the income gained and must be borne by general funds.

Money has become an integral part of the college sports landscape. The flood of money starts in the professional leagues, then cascades down to the college ranks, which in some important ways act as uncompensated farm systems for the professional leagues, and finally swirls down to high school, then splashes down on youth sports leagues. Of course, we’ve had professional sports leagues for a long time. But the advent of cable tv and the increasingly huge media market created by ESPN, the NCAA, the major conferences, sports radio, and others, has created a tsunami of revenue over the last twenty years for the sports world. Internet connectivity and smart phones have amplified the money in sports on all levels and created new ways of bringing in revenue.

Big money influences how decisions are made and has done more than create a number of wealthy owners, media companies, and athletes. When colleges rely on their football and basketball teams to bring in huge amounts of revenues to help pay for their large athletic programs, it changes the way that they think about sports, and removes the focus from where it should be— reinforcing the positive role that sports should play in the development of young men and women athletes, particularly low income, minority, first generation college students. In turn, the athletic preference for athletes in college admissions has caused a number of high schools to increase their attention and resources to athletics, which has then caused parents to spend even more time and money on sports expenditures for their pre-high school and high school athletes in the hopes that their children might win a college scholarship or gain admission to the many selective colleges that give a big preference to athletes. The elite private schools, a former easy ticket to the Ivy League and other elite colleges, understand that one way to improve the odds that their college matriculation lists will impress parents is to scour the country and world for some extraordinary athletes to improve their sports teams and interest college coaches. Youth sports are increasingly seen as possible tickets to admission at good schools, and so young athletes are pushed too hard and often concentrate on only one sport, which can be harmful for developing bodies. This negative feedback loop perfectly mirrors the larger world of college admissions at the top schools where parents and students feel pressured to create resumes that will gain them admission to the most prestigious schools. In both situations, the ultimate losers are the kids themselves, who are forced to act in ways that are most likely harmful to them in the long term.

 You can’t blame the kids, of course. Each responsible adult— the admissions officer, the coach, the admissions consultant hired to shepherd a hopeful applicant through the process, the specialized consultant in specific sports that promise to work with a young athlete to get admitted to colleges; the university president who wants the school to be in the news, the alumni booster, the headmaster of an elite boarding school who feels pressured to have good teams because all their peers do, the parent who pours resources into equipment and extra coaching and travel and tournament fees— all are acting in ways that don’t seem unreasonable. But if you add the impact of all their actions together, you get a system that ultimately serves the institutional interests of the schools, and loses sight of the needs of the students. To change a phrase that President Eisenhower famously coined in a speech at the end of his Presidency, we’ve created a sports-educational complex that is very resistant to change.

I also wonder about another potential big risk for schools that have big athletic programs. The NFL and the NHL have been dealing with the risks of their athletes suffering permanent brain damage from repeated blows to the head. The movie Concussion dramatizes the horrible toll that Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), permanent brain damage that can result from a severe blow, or repeated smaller blows, to the head. Concussion highlights former Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster’s spiral of personality change, dealing with debilitating headaches, financial ruin, divorce and, finally suicide. By studying his brain and the brains of other athletes, forensic pathologist Bennet Omalu realized that his brain had been permanently damaged by repeated blows on the football field. Other doctors began to examine the brains of dead players, and some players who were driven to suicide by CTE purposely shot themselves in the chest and left notes saying that they wanted to donate their brains to CTE researchers. The NFL suppressed this news as best they could, but eventually had to acknowledge a link between football and CTE.

Recently, scientists have announced that they’ve made progress on a e test to determine if living people have CTE. If this is perfected, it will make the costs and benefits of playing violent professional sports very clear for potential NFL and NHL players. If a professional player over the age of 21 knows the risks and knowingly takes it, that seems fair enough. But what about all the college players who may have permanent health problems from playing college sports? After all, very few of the players in division one colleges will even get drafted, much less have a lucrative professional career. And many there are even more players in division two and three. Division one football players get health insurance that lasts for one year after they’ve graduated. Then they’re on their own for any health problems caused by playing, including by blows to the head. Schools are aware of the risks, as the new Ivy League football rules that limit full contact in practice, as well as new concussion protocols during games, attest. Conveniently, university scientists can use their teams as test subjects-- Stanford researchers put sensors in the helmets of their football team to better “understand what causes a concussion, what causes these brain injuries.”

It’s one thing for a grown adult to make a reasoned choice about whether to take the risk of playing a sport like football. It’s quite another if a recruited 18 years old athlete is specifically brought in to do an activity that may cause permanent disability many years later. Many of those young athletes dream of a pro career, but we know that only a tiny fraction will get this chance. How many ex-college football players have suffered or will suffer from the effects of CTE? If a reliable test is developed, is anyone responsible to help the former athletes as they deal with CTE? Of course, this is a slippery slope argument, because concussions are common in many other men and women’s sports and in life accidents sometimes happens. But if it turns out that students that play helmet sports are much more likely to develop CTE, what then? Why couldn’t a bitter, damaged former football player sue the college that brought them in to play, without taking any safeguards to prevent injury? Shouldn’t the schools at least be responsible for their health bills?

Athletics also represents an enormous investment for schools that aren’t lucky enough to have big time football and basketball teams that bring in tens of millions of dollars a year in revenue. Paradoxically, the Ivy League sports departments have the largest institutional cost. The administrative expense for each athlete is over four times more than the expense of his or her non-athletic Ivy League peer. Put another way, if you are an Ivy League hockey player, the school will pay five times more to support you than a non-athlete.

This large institutional commitment raises troubling questions. How can Harvard and other elite colleges and universities justify annually spending more on each athlete, as compared to their non-athletic classmates? Do recruited athletes who represent approximately 12% of the student bodies at Yale and Princeton, deserve to get the same financial support from the university than 50% of the non-athletes receive? Are the schools that prize diversity in their student body at all responsible for the dismal number of black head coaches and athletic conference executives? Is there something intrinsic about athletics that deserves to be so heavily favored in the increasingly competitive world of elite college admissions? In short, does the emphasis on athletics over any other extra-curricular activity or admissions preference further the institutional values of our top colleges and universities?

Over the years, some voices have questioned the value of having the most selective colleges have nationally competitive sports teams. In the Ivy League at various times over the last century, professors have tried to pressure admissions committees to minimize athletic preference. But each time, the faculty committees formed to suggest changes fizzled out. The Ivy League only exists as a sports league and the presidents only get together to discuss athletic policies. Understandably sensitive to criticism of their varsity sports programs, they created something called the Academic Index, where every incoming Ivy League student is ranked based on test scores and high school grades. Then each sport is allowed a certain discount from the mean of the AI of the class. So football and basketball, which would have players who were more likely to be minorities and low income, would be allowed admission if they were further below the class average than say, a sailor, who is more likely to be from a white, wealthy background.

For many years, coaches would encourage great athletes with grades that were below the threshold to do a post graduate year, a fifth year of high school, at a prep school with terrific sports. Then they would have time to improve their test scores. In addition, they could also calculate their AI with their test scores and their GPA from the PG year, and not have to count their high school grades. After a time, this was considered to be too unfair, so now the policy is that they average their high school GPA with the PG year. So high school grades at least count for something.

There certainly are top varsity athletes at elite schools who are superb students, and alumni magazines and other media outlets enjoy publicizing them. However, as a whole, athletes are much more likely to end up in the bottom third of their classes. And while grades and test scores certainly shouldn’t be the only consideration for admission, the most selective schools could replace all their athletes with straight A student with a nearly perfect ACT and SAT average. Athletes certainly can add to a school, but so could more scholastic geniuses or gifted musicians. Having a notable extra-curricular activity can impress admissions officers, but there is no institutional favoritism as there for athletics. In other words, the Academic Index can’t be used to justify admission for skilled writers or musicians who have lower grades and test scores than the overall class.

The athletic preference at our most selective schools must be seen against the incredibly competitive admissions process. The top schools could have an entire class with a perfect SAT average and not one high school B among them. They reject thousands of academically qualified students each year. In 2010, the Harvard Dean of Admissions told me that 18,000 applicants were projected honors Harvard graduates. This makes the admissions process one of exclusion. You have to find ways to make your list smaller. In this environment, anything that makes the schools pay special attention to you and look for reasons to let you in is incredibly valuable.

If athletes as a group are going to be favored for the increasingly competitive and coveted admission slots, the only rational institutional argument is that they would make the school a better place even if they decided to not play. Athletes at non- scholarship schools, such as the Ivy League and NESCAC schools, are not obligated to play. Once you get in, you’re in. This is a good policy overall, since it’s sometimes surprisingly difficult to predict which athletes will be able to compete at the next level. Only half of recruited Ivy League athletes end up playing for four years because they move on to other interests, get injured, or get frustrated that they aren’t getting any chance to compete for top varsity spots, which was why I stopped rowing at Harvard my senior year.

A common argument is that athletics can help create a diverse student body. But this excuse quickly breaks down. While football and basketball players are predominantly black, there are too many other sports that are predominantly white. Consider the 2015-2016 National Men and Women’s Lacrosse Championships between UNC and Maryland. UNC won both games. The UNC men’s roster of 46 and the women’s roster of 34 were all white. The Maryland women had a roster of 31 white women, and the men had a roster of 47, with three black players. Then add in rowing, hockey and swimming, other almost exclusively white sports, and soon you realize that athletes at most schools are going to decrease overall student diversity.

Many athletes, coaches, former athletes, parents of athletes, and the NCAA would argue that there is something intrinsic about sports that explains why our colleges should reward athletics more than any other extra-curricular. Sports can teach teamwork, sportsmanship, the value of hard work, how to deal with defeat, help create a more diverse student body, build a positive brand image for the school, and increase alumni donations. If they aren’t as academically qualified, that’s because of the huge time demands of competing on a high level. Implicit in this argument is that they would have better grades if they didn’t practice so much.

It turns out that each of these justifications falls short. College athletes are distinct from their non-athletic peers. They are more conservative, more interested in making money, and more likely to major in easier subjects. Athletes don’t do any better than non-athletes after college and are much more likely to work in financial fields. Furthermore, athletes tend to group themselves with other athletes, and often live with their teammates. And long afternoon practices mean that many courses, such as those with long labs and seminars, are off limits to athletes. Many athletes take some summer school courses so that they can fulfill requirements and take a lighter load during their seasons. I can attest to the physical toll that training for college athletics takes. Looking back, I basically went to class, ate, did homework or slept. I missed all sorts of opportunities to hear speakers and try new things because I was so focused on rowing.

 Most importantly, athletes do not perform as well academically as their high school grades and test scores predict they should. This is in contrast to students with other equally, or even more, time consuming activities such as working on the school newspaper, acting, or playing an instrument—these students perform better academically than their test scores and high school grades predict. So the evidence does show that athletes as a whole are a special category-- as a group that does worse academically than they should.

And while training to be a top athlete and learning how to be a team player certainly can be evidence of excellent character, sports can also teach negative lessons. While it’s true that rules and referees provide boundaries during games, many sports reward aggressive, violent and physical play on the field. Recruited college athletes have been rewarded their entire lives for this. This can dovetail with the tribal element of sports as well, which can reinforce an us versus them mentality that not only isolate college athletes from other students, but also can trap them in the kind of behavior which has drawn positive attention from coaches. It’s fine to be proud sexist warriors on the field and in the privacy of the locker room, but we expect athletes to leave that behavior behind when they go back to their dorm rooms. It’s likely that the changing nature of youth and high school sports, where good athletes spend more and more time playing one sport with a small number of team mates, exacerbates this negative possibility.

For some male athletes, the culture of being on a team can reinforce attitudes and behavior towards women that conflicts with institutional efforts to reign in misogyny and various forms of sexual abuse. In 2016, Harvard moved swiftly to suspend the season of their 14-2 men’s soccer team when the administration learned that since 2012, Harvard soccer players have created rankings of Harvard women players in lewd, sexual terms. The Harvard women wrote that while they were saddened to learn that men they considered to be friends acted in this way “the sad reality is that we have come to expect this kind of behavior from so many men…” This brings up the alarming possibility that the athletic preference in college admissions may adding to the problems of sexism and sexual abuse that most colleges are spending considerable resources to ameliorate.

When I first began thinking about the issue of athletic preference in our most selective colleges, I thought the answer was obvious. Given the increasing corporatization of higher education in the US, it would be all about money. Athletics would be a necessary component of a sustainable organization that brought in alumni donations, made alumni more enthusiastic about their alma maters, and increased diversity at the same time. After all, it’s no accident that the ruling bodies of Harvard, Yale and Princeton are called the Harvard, Yale and Princeton Corporations, respectively. Like any organization, the board of a college or university must first make sure that the institution endures. And in the selective college world, this means serious cash donations from alumni. However, alumni at the most selective schools rank having good sports teams as being one of the least important issues to them.

The case for the current emphasis on athletics is surprisingly difficult to make and that the increasing professionalization of sports on the collegiate level has undermined the rationale for athletics in their current form in our elite colleges. In short, the level of sports has gotten so high that there simply aren’t enough athletes that can meet the increasingly high academic standards at the most elite schools that have good sports programs. Twenty years ago college coaches would be looking to bring in good athletes. Now they need to bring in a gifted right tackle or hockey goalie. I went back to my high school reunion in 2010 and watched a lacrosse game. I had photographed Yale sports from when we moved to New Haven in 1991, and realized that almost every player I watched on this high school field almost ten years later would have been a star on those earlier Yale teams.

Put another way, there aren’t enough players who can meet the increasingly high academic standards demanded by our top schools. If Yale and Harvard want to vie for the national men’s hockey collegiate championships, which they do, they must compete with Union and Quinnipiac, which play in the same league, the ECAC. Not to mention Michigan, North Dakota and every other school that has a good hockey team. But these schools have a very different academic threshold for admissions.

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Now we come to a question any reader should ask, “Why should we listen to you?”

Well, to understand the role of athletics in colleges, we have to go back and look at how admissions at elite universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton developed from the 1900s and the importance that their admissions policies placed on being more than just a smart student. With some important exceptions, these schools have provided an admissions template that most US colleges have come to follow.

In many ways my life has been a case study in Ivy League admissions. As you’ll see, I have been somehow involved with the Ivy League since 1979, when my parents bought a school bus yellow Suburban to bring my oldest brother Tim to Harvard. I also am an example of the athletic preference in admissions—I was accepted into only one school, Harvard, because I was on the rowing coaches’ list.

I’ll start introducing myself with a story…

 Once, on a return flight from an extended trip to the rainforest of Malaysia where I photographed animals and plants in the rainforest canopy, I began to feel bad and thought I’d come down with a bad case of the flu. After we got home and I began to feel worse, my wife, Amity, and I did some research and concluded that I had contracted dengue fever. It’s no accident that dengue is also known as breakbone fever.

The fever, muscle pain and headache I could have managed, but the waves of joint pain, where it felt as if each of my fingers and toes were clamped in a vice and then beaten by a deranged baseball player, hurt so intensely that tears poured down my face. So Amity ordered me into the car and I ended up spending the only night of my life in the hospital since I was born, an IV drip stuck in my arm and answering the same series of questions from eager residents excited at the teaching opportunity that I was providing for them. One whispered his disappointment to a colleague, “I thought it would hurt more.” After I recovered, I imagined that I would never have a worst night. Sadly, I was wrong.

 The night when my oldest daughter Eliza found out online that she had been rejected from all the most selective US Universities that she’d applied to was a new low. Not physical pain, but the kind of wrenching anguish that parents can feel when their kids are kicked in the teeth by life and there’s not a damn thing that you can do to make it better. Eliza, who is dyslexic and spent seven years working five days a week with a tutor to learn to read. Who collected journals and books and writing implements even though she was embarrassed that she couldn’t fill them with the stories in her mind because, she said, the “pencil feels bigger than me.” Who loved being read to so much that I once read out loud the Voyage of the Bassett, her favorite book, for the entire flight from Hartford to Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia (30 hours, with breaks to walk around in airports), where we arrived, tired, my voice shot. And who patiently learned to manage her dyslexia so she was able to attend the Hopkins School in New Haven, a very competitive private high school, gaining on her peers each year until senior year where her grades were terrific and she was only 110 points off of a perfect SAT score of 2400, a score that would have put her in the top 5% of admitted Harvard freshmen, and who in the summer of her junior year in high school earned A’s in Yale summer school Cognitive Science and Chemistry classes.

 Amity and I knew firsthand that she was smarter than most of the kids accepted by the Harvard’s and Yale’s of the world. Amity was the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Environmental Studies major at Yale and knows precisely the strengths and weaknesses of students that make it through the admission process at top colleges and universities. We also knew that the writing requirements of a traditional liberal arts curriculum would have been a challenge for a slow writer like Eliza. Still, it’s no fun to see your child deal with rejection when so many of her peers at her highly ranked private school were celebrating acceptances to selective schools, believing that their lives were destined to be happy and successful. Eliza’s story, as you will find out later, ended up in a surprising and positive way for her.

But as I watched Eliza and other good high school students slog through the admission process, I realized how rotten the system really is for the kids who apply. I began to think about what I would like high school students to know about the admission process.

You don’t have to look far to realize that the system is broken. Kids and parents, desperate to get into the right college or university, over-inflate the importance of getting into a top institution, and make the already stressful high school years even worse for many students. Colleges and universities, in an increasingly competitive marketplace, faced with an economy that ravaged endowments, declining government support, and a world that’s becoming more international, act to perpetuate themselves and are desperate to keep their elite status or go up in the college rankings to compete for the best students. The testing and tutoring industry grows in importance as institutions look for more ways to rank students and students look for ways to improve their admission chances. Some parents resort to hiring expensive counselors to manage the application process, some starting in freshman year in high school. The internet and the Common Application have made it possible to easily apply to dozens of schools, which in turn drive admission rates lower and lower—something that actually increases the institution’s rank in lists provided by US News and World Report, among others.

Students from good public and private schools no longer get into the most selective colleges and universities at the same rate than their parents’ generation did, so they try to create resumes that will make them more attractive to good schools. Pressured by high expectations and intense Asian-Tiger-Mom type parents, cheating appears to be much more common and is sometimes encouraged by parents and tacitly endorsed by teachers. Most worrisome of all, demand for mental health counseling for college students has been growing every year. All these factors combine and swirl around and become bigger and bigger, like a snowball pushed down a steep hill, creating a process that, at the end, rolls over and damages all high school students, both those that succeed in getting into the most selective institutions and those that don’t.

There is a perception that schools like Harvard are these perfect, fair, institutions that, like some sort of wise Solomon, carefully consider each applicant and pick only the worthiest and most deserving for their freshman class. That would be wrong. Certainly there are objective standards like test scores and grades, but just as important, and sometimes more so, are subjective standards that have shifted over time. The better way to think about Harvard is as if it’s a giant person, with its own hopes and dreams for the future that, like the lone applicant, is primarily concerned with perpetuating itself and growing stronger. Crucially, Harvard and other good colleges and universities also are constantly adjusting their admission criteria in response to larger social, economic and political changes. So Harvard says it always admits those who exhibit the most “merit”, but the definition of what “merit” means changes. This means that Ivy League graduates of my generation should realize that it’s very unlikely that students who are just like they were would get in now.

Harvard can’t afford to care about the actual applicants and they certainly don’t try to only accept the applicants that they think rank the highest academically. Here’s where the “holistic” approach comes in, considering grades, test scores, and things like character and leadership. The beauty of this system for schools like Harvard is that it allows them to accept applicants that don’t rank as high academically. The ideal applicant is well rounded, they say. That allows them to let in promising students from inner cities who haven’t had the opportunity of going to a good school, children of big donors, children of famous people, and good left-handed baseball pitchers with lower test scores than many Harvard applicants, for example.

Bill Fitzsimmons, the longtime Harvard Dean of Admissions, and I exchanged a series of letters after Eliza was rejected and he explained that the committee looks to build a class that they call a “mosaic”. This suggests that it’s more art than science. He said that Eliza was one of the 18,000 applicants in 2010 with academic credentials that the committee projected to be honors Harvard graduates. Of course, under this “holistic” system, it’s almost a certainty that not all of the less than 2,000 students accepted were projected honors graduates. But once Harvard picks their incoming class, they immediately begin to market them, boasting of how many double 800 SAT students that they rejected, how the incoming class is the most accomplished ever. Because, in the end, schools like Harvard want to run annual features in their alumni magazine listing all the Harvard alumni who are Senators, members of Congress, Governors, financial wizards, and other successful graduates from all across the country. They need to convince everyone that anyone who goes to Harvard is the best of the best.

Our best schools have the luxury of having to reject large numbers of supremely qualified applicants. Because there are so many to choose from, admissions becomes about exclusion, rather that inclusion. Faced with so many over-qualified applicants, admissions officers look for easy ways to weed out applicants. Emphasizing geographic diversity can help by limiting the number of students from areas like the Northeast, with large numbers of very good public and private high schools who apply in large numbers to the most elite schools. Admissions offices can also point to research showing that kids from high socio-economic backgrounds do better on standardized tests, so they can quickly reject many relatively rich kids with lower test scores. At Yale, the committee won't be impressed if you have a B in any high school course if you go to a good prep school, because they know that they can just let a similar student who got straight A's.

It’s important to note that there is no other major country that has a university admission system like ours. We are outliers. Admission for most of the world’s universities is based on a test. If you do well enough, then you can go to a good university. If you don’t, then you can go to a less-highly ranked one. If you bomb it, then usually you simply can’t go to university. When Eliza applied to Oxford and other schools in the UK, there was no section in the application to list extra-curricular activities. They took your SAT’s and SAT subject tests, combined them with your high school grades, and turned you into a number and offered admission to the top applicants.

The peculiar nature of the US system really hit me several years ago. We had traveled to Scotland to share Thanksgiving with Eliza, then an honors psychology student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and her friends. Over pumpkin pie (a revelation to the English, it turns out), we tried to explain how a good athlete could be accepted over a more academically qualified applicant to a school like Yale or Princeton. The very idea was so absurd that the British students just couldn’t understand. They kept saying “But how is that fair?” The point is that fairness has very little to do with US selective college and university admissions. With so many qualified applicants, it would be impossible to design a fair system. The schools of course know this, but are loathe to say it out loud because they need people to believe that wise, all-knowing admissions offices only offer admission to the most deserving students.

While there are sports at colleges and universities, no other country has schools that integrate sports so tightly into their higher education systems. At the University of Edinburgh, there are some school teams, but the university doesn't consider athletic ability in their application process. The real sports action at Edinburgh is in club sports, highlighted every year by a rugby tournament between all the different club teams where spectators could buy keg beer to help raise money for the programs. The assumption is that if you're really good at a sport like soccer, you will already be in an academy run by one of the teams in the various professional soccer leagues. No other country has the American system where Division I football, basketball, baseball, hockey and lacrosse teams in part act as unpaid farm teams for the professional leagues.

Of course, I knew none of this when I headed off to Harvard in 1983, four years after my oldest brother Tim. When we drove Tim to college, my Mom insisted that we buy a new car for the trip and the seven of us piled in for our first trip to Cambridge. I’m sure that we turned some heads as we pulled into Harvard Yard in our school bus yellow Suburban, which was the only car at that time that fit five boys and their parents. Four of the five Doolittle boys ended up going to Harvard, with one brother going to Middlebury. (My twin brother Jon, who went to Middlebury, and probably received the best education of us all.) Two of my cousins went to Harvard. I met my wife Amity at Harvard and later we came to Yale, where she got her Master’s, then ph.D, in Forestry and Environmental studies and she’s remained ever since. Currently she is a Senior Lecturer. My father taught Expository Writing at Harvard for 5 years. My father in law got both his undergraduate degree and MBA at Harvard. Amity’s great uncle went to Harvard and was awarded the Harvard medal in honor of his service to his alma mater. My mother got her Master’s in Education from Harvard. Amity’s sister was recently awarded her ph.D. in Education from Harvard, following in the footsteps of her husband. In addition, New Haven is a small town, so I’ve had many conversations with various Deans, Professors and Administrators since 1992. In a great "small world" story, this includes the former Yale Dean of Admission who was responsible for rejecting me! And, as a photographer, I’ve been on campus a good deal, going to many classes and getting to know students. And Amity and I invite students over to our house for pot luck dinners several times a year.

In many ways my life has been an unintended experiment in college admissions and the relative value of going to a more selective school, and, most importantly, the value of being on a coaches' recruiting list at a top school. As I mentioned, I am an identical twin and we went to the same private Episcopal high school in Connecticut that was considered a step down academically from prestigious schools like Exeter and Hotchkiss. Though we took different courses, our high school gpa’s were within one tenth of each other’s and we both achieved high honors for high school and were inducted into the Cum Laude society our junior years. Jon finished second in our class and I was third or fourth (I can't remember which). He was more involved in the school community, serving as the vice president of our class, and we both lettered in three varsity sports both junior and senior years. We both did reasonably well on our SATs, scoring a little over 1350 (The SAT now is graded on a new scale, so our scores would be a little higher than 1400 using today’s metric, and now they are changing again.), around the average for the admitted Harvard class of 1987. But we did have one crucial difference as far as the admission’s committee was concerned-- I rowed and he played lacrosse, so he didn’t enjoy the benefit of having the Harvard rowing coach put him on his recruit list.

So he didn’t get in.

I was able to confirm that rowing got me in when the coach told my brother Ted, one year ahead of me at Harvard, “it was harder than I thought it was going to be” to get me in. Years later, when my mom earned her Masters in education at Harvard, a Dean came in to talk about admissions and said that they had a policy for identical twins, where they either accepted both, or neither. When she challenged him, he said that she must have been mistaken.

Looking back, I realize that we had very poor advice from our college counselor, who assumed we’d get in everywhere. For example, I don’t think that we even thought it was a big deal that, by the summer of our Junior years, we had built a house painting business grossing $45,000/summer ($95,000 in 2013 dollars) with seven employees, a refurbished 1948 ford fire truck as a work vehicle, and worker’s compensation insurance. A friend of the family asked us to paint for him when we were 14 and, after learning the job for a year, we hired our first employee, an older boy whose main qualification was that he had a driver’s license. During our college years we employed seven classmates, ran two crews, and finished a house every week or two.

After getting over his disappointment with getting a small letter when his twin got the coveted big envelope, Jon went off to Middlebury, which started earlier than Harvard and I realized that, while we had different pants and shirts, we had been sharing underwear, t-shirts and socks and actually only had enough for one and half people. He ended up walking onto the two-time New England championship Middlebury men’s soccer team after only playing one year of soccer in high school, was named the student athlete of his class senior year, and was co-author of a scholarly article with his Geology professor his senior year. He switched majors at the end of Junior year and completed all his requirements, including a thesis, in one year. Jon, a lawyer now, has somehow managed, in spite of his non-Ivy League degree, to create a successful career at one of the most prestigious law firm in the US. (More details on his career path later.)

I will never forget going up early to Cambridge to do some work study work for something called dorm crew, where we did things like put new mattresses in all the freshman dorms. Nothing like carrying out old mattresses and hauling up new ones in five-story walk up dorms for 1,600 students, it turns out. I assumed that I had only gotten in for rowing and was expecting that all my Harvard classmates would be way smarter than me, boasting of off the chart SATs and terrific grades. As I got to know my classmates, I realized that a good number of them were actually less academically qualified than Jon in almost every way. For example, in my year, Harvard admitted almost 20 kids from the traditional feeder school St. Paul’s and many of those kids not only weren’t in the top 15% of their class, they didn’t care about academics at all. What kind of system was this?

One day after work I came back to my empty first floor Strauss Hall room after dorm crew and discovered that the lock was broken, so I couldn’t get in. Using my painter skills and a small knife I had, I jimmied a back window, slithered in, and called a locksmith when I realized that I couldn’t even open the door from the inside. Someone had seen me and the Harvard police appeared and wanted to know why I had broken in, and it took me a while, in sweaty, dirty clothes, to convince them that I belonged. Then a morbidly obese locksmith showed up and discovered that the lock had to be taken apart from the inside. Since there was no way we could shoehorn him in through the window, he gave me his tools and shouted instructions to me from outside. There I was, locked out, peering in a window, questioned by the police, forced to clamber through the back window twice until the damn door worked. But the door worked for the rest of the year. On the one hand over my years at Harvard, I realized that I belonged intellectually, on the other hand, Jon’s experience never let me forget that I was only there because of perhaps the most underrated of all ingredients in life—luck.

In no way do I want to embarrass, make fun, or denigrate Yale or Yalies, especially the athletes themselves. They are simply reacting to the admissions climate that has been designed by well-intentioned adults doing what they thought was best for their institutions. And Yale shows that the Ivy League has become much more student friendly, much more supportive of students than the Ivy League my brothers and I attended in the 1980s and 90’s. If anything, I’ve come to believe that Yale sometimes gives students too much support. And we live in a lovely residential area in New Haven where almost every house has a Yale professor or administrator and the seemingly requisite Prius in the drive.

In my experience, most people over estimate the benefits of going to a place like Yale. Sure it’s unlikely that you’ll get named to the Supreme Court unless you’ve gone to Yale, Harvard, or Stanford Law School. But it turns out it’s surprisingly hard to prove that going to a highly selective school will benefit you in the long run, with the important exception of students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. (Put in reference to Bok article, and the other one that takes the opposite view) People always talk about the great connections that you make. But I assure you that there is no phone number that you can call when you’re between jobs and say you’re a Harvard graduate and want to get a high paying job that’s emotionally satisfying, has a flexible schedule and you can start on Monday. My friend Chip was a member of Skull and Bones, the most prestigious Yale secret society, and still is an active Bones alum. Search Skull and Bones on the internet and you discover that some feel it is part of a world-wide conspiracy that controls many of the world’s politicians and vast swathes of the economy. Alas, poor Chip, a superb networker, hasn’t found that his exclusive membership in the ultimate Ivy League club shortens his job searches.

In my experience, Harvard didn’t always pick the most-worthy applicants in the late 1980s when the admission rates was 15%. So how can admissions committees pick the most-worthy 4% of the tens of thousands of applicants now, many of whom are academically qualified? The point isn’t that most of the students accepted at the top institutions don’t deserve to be let in, it’s that there are many thousands who don’t get accepted who are just as deserving. Much as I enjoy interacting with Amity’s students, I also know many of their peers who didn’t get in to the top schools who will be able to compete with them in the job market after college. In some cases, the fact that they didn’t get into their top choices has made them more impressive, and it will surprise me if they don’t out-compete many of the kids that did get into more selective institutions once they enter the work force.

What college students, especially those who have been fortunate enough to attend the most highly ranked schools, don’t realize is that the set of skills that has allowed them to succeed in high school and college are not necessarily the skills that they need to succeed in the workplace. The system has gotten so competitive that you probably won’t get in if you’ve made any mistake at all, which is too bad when you consider that we’re talking about teenagers who really should be making mistakes and stretching themselves.

If you go by credentials, today’s top college students have better resumes in every way than any group of graduates in history. On paper, they’re so amazing that it almost defies belief. How can people accomplish so much in only eighteen years?

But one common theme that arises from my conversations with many Yale faculty over the years is an intense frustration with some of their students. One business school professor told me that he didn’t realize that he’d have to teach some of the undergraduates the basics of writing. “The math is pretty easy, but I have to teach them how to write a decent paper, and I never realized that was going to be the case at a school like Yale.” Over the years, it’s become clear that some Environmental Science major Yalies have never had to write a long research paper, and the department works with the students for two years to try and shepherd them through the process of writing the 40 page required thesis. One year a student simply couldn’t get started, and after months of encouragement and one on one engagement, Amity got an email where he excitedly announced that he had written his first sentence and proudly sent it along.

Every year Amity is amazed by some behavior from her undergraduate students. Students asking of recommendations on the morning of their due date, asking her to reschedule office hours a few minutes before they are scheduled because they haven’t had lunch yet, asking her if she would meet them closer to their dorms because they are so tired and can’t face the less than ten minute walk to her office, asking for an extension via an error-riddled email on their smart phone from the water in the middle of a sailing race, saying that they are going on a department field trip and asking for all sort of special food for the trip, then simply not showing up. One year, a student came to her office hours in a panic because she had two papers due on the same day. What can I do, she wondered? Amity patiently explained that she might plan ahead, and write one paper early and plan to work extra hours in the two weeks before they were due. “But I don’t work on weekends, so how can I find the time?” When Amity explained that sometimes she worked on weekends (in fact, almost all the time during the school year!), the student was incredulous. “Did you do that when you were an undergraduate?”

The most selective schools have always served a tiny percentage of the population. When Yale finishes building two new residential colleges and adds 800 students, it will mark the first major expansion in the Ivy League in many decades. Since the population keeps growing and the schools have sharply increased the percentage of foreign students, our elite schools educate the smallest number of Americans in their history. I view this as a good thing, since this is improving the student bodies of schools that are considered less competitive. There are lots of very good schools happy to accept the top students that are routinely rejected by the most competitive colleges today. It’s very hard to argue that an Ivy League education is superior to one you could get at other colleges and universities such as Swarthmore, Barnard, the University of Rochester, and good state systems.

In addition, the way that the most selective universities are organized works against attracting the best teachers. The demands of the tenure process and academic research take up a huge amount of time, which often means making teaching a lower priority. At Yale, they don’t even bother to have the most basic teaching orientation for new ladder track faculty. Some new teachers have never taught at all, and there is no institutional support to help them figure it out. And, given the fact that tenure decisions in no way depend on teaching skill, it’s actually a dangerous career move to spend too much time preparing lectures and interacting with students.

It’s funny that parents who wouldn’t think of putting their precious children in an elementary or high school where many of the teachers weren’t rewarded for teaching or had never done it before have no problem sending their kids to places that don’t have teaching mentor systems for new faculty, or any kind of institutional help available for faculty who want to become better teachers.

I originally thought about writing a book about the overall admissions system, but that idea seemed too big. As I’ve discussed here, there is no way to design a truly fair system. A test-based system seems too arbitrary, and the current holistic system gives the schools too much discretion. Then it occurred to me that my experience highlighted the one really problematical area in college admissions—the heavy emphasis on athletics. I believe most people haven’t thought about this issue too much. We just think that it’s part of how the world works. But given the changing nature of sports in the US, the elite schools should rethink how they organize their athletic programs and how they prioritize athletes in admissions. After all, our top schools have been, and continue to be, supported by all taxpayers, so we all have an interest in how they are run.

Land grant schools were designated by a state under the authority of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. Some were private such as Cornell, MIT, and Tuskegee. Most were public like Rutgers and Pennsylvania State, and the University of Minnesota. All were founded with a gift of public land and all benefit from their non-profit status so donations are tax-free. And private institutions enjoy non-profit status as well. That represents a real cost to all federal taxpayers, adding up to hundreds of billions in support over the years. Stanford is unique in that it has a separate endowment for its athletic program. Given that many schools are spending much more on their athletes, it’s fair to consider whether donations directly to Stanford athletics or indirectly to the athletic programs at other elite schools actually serve the public good.

Now onto the history of the development of the modern admission system in the US…

But before I do that, one quick word about my credentials as a writer. I’m not one.

I’ve spent my after-college life as a photo-journalist. I helped people build and design rainforest canopy walkways in Peru and Malaysia, photographed high in the canopy, worked for various news publications such as the New York Times and have illustrated numerous children’s books for several publishers. I also looked after Eliza when she was 4 while we lived in a small house on stilts with no electricity on the foothills of Mt. Kinabalu in Malaysia while Amity did her PhD research on land use.

Amity has decided not to pursue a tenure track career. And at a status-driven place like Yale, this lessens her in the eyes of many tenured professors. I’m just the male spouse of a senior lecturer and have watched in amusement over the years how, once they find out who I am, some of the Yale Professoriate immediately dismiss me as someone worth paying attention to. These are folks who can take themselves very seriously. Once two neighbors on our blockwatch email chain argued in long, footnoted emails about what kind of trees the city uses to plant by our curbs. For them, the fact that I just have an undergraduate degree might mean that they shouldn’t listen to me.

In my defense, I thought I would be an academic. I majored in History and believed that I wanted to be an historian right up to my oral exam to determine whether I would graduate Cum Laude or Magna Cum Laude. Just me and three professors, whom I had never talked to before. I had prepared extensively with my tutor, a new hire who had never been through this process, had no teaching experience, and, as is typical in the Ivy League, had gone through no orientation program to give him any training in teaching. We both thought I was prepared, and we were both wrong. He said they’d ask about my honors exam and thesis, which I had written on the American Catholic reaction to the Vietnam War, using the Boston Archdiocese as a case study. The first question was, “tell me about the European Irish Catholic reaction and compare it to how the Eastern European Catholics felt about the Vietnam War?”

So I graduated Cum Laude, and, as I walked back to my room I thought I better take a few years off, because I didn’t want to become one of those professors in that stuffy room. One thing led to another, in the way that life goes, so here I am.