

ATHLETICS VS. ACADEMICS PRIORITY

Student-athletes have different agendas for the respective roles that athletics and academics should play in college. The personal agenda that you and your child share will guide which schools you end up targeting. *Think very hard about where you/your child fit on this continuum of athletic vs. academic priorities.* One is no better or worse than the other, you just need to determine what is right for you.

Athletic Priority

Some high school athletes care more about continuing their sport than their academics, and they will focus more on schools that have the best national reputation for that sport. Given a choice between a mediocre academic school with a strong sports team and a stronger academic school with a mediocre sports team, they are more likely to pick the former than the latter. If their motive for college is more about athletics than academics, priority will be given to schools that give them a full ride, regardless of the reputation or academic standards of the school. Kids who are either elite athletes or mediocre students are more likely to give athletics a higher priority.

Academic Priority

Other kids care as much or more about the quality of the education and the college experience they will have, and will only consider schools that can deliver on these criteria in addition to a positive sports experience. This may be an internal motivation and it may be driven more by their parents. They will try to get scholarship money if they can from a particular school, but they won't make their school choice based on money alone, and they won't attend a school that doesn't fit their non-athletic criteria just because they were offered money. Kids who are stronger academically and know they probably don't have a future in professional sports are more likely to make academics their priority.

The foundation of academic priority is set long before the college selection process. Let me give you a great example from my own experience. At a local AAU basketball tournament several years ago, a man sat next to me who had a son playing on the opposite team of my son's. He asked me which player my son was and then we went back to watching the game. When the game was over, he gave me his personal (and unsolicited) assessment of my son's strengths and weaknesses. Then he asked me what high school my son attended. After a minute of deep thought, he gave me his (again unsolicited) appraisal of the situation. He suggested that I should uproot my family, sell our home, and move to another school district that had a high school basketball program better suited to developing the areas he thought my son needed to work on. (Since these are all public high schools, you must live in the district to attend that school.) I mentioned that the school my son currently attended has a reputation for strong academics and that was part of the reason we chose to live in that community. The school he was suggesting did not. I couldn't imagine uprooting my family and switching my son to a lower quality academic environment for a basketball situation. He couldn't imagine passing up the opportunity to maximize a kid's basketball training in preparation for a basketball career. We clearly occupied opposite ends of the academic vs. athletic priority continuum.

When you're considering the role this plays on the colleges that will remain on your list, one main difference between D-I and D-III is that D-I

programs tend to **prioritize athletics over academics** just by virtue of the time and travel commitment required.

Choose the school that meets your child's educational and emotional needs the best—not the school with the ten-time champions, free clothes, shoes, year-round competition and the like—remember, the bigger the sport and what goes with that, the less time for academics—and in the end, very, very few student-athletes will ever play their sport for a living.

Stuart Swink, Head Coach, Men's and Women's Tennis, Frostburg State

The choice of athletics over academics is also driven by the desire to get a scholarship and get at least some of it paid for. But scholarship aside, highly demanding athletic programs can take their toll on the student-athlete. In a *New York Times* article titled “Expectations Lose to Reality of Sports Scholarships,” Bill Pennington wrote:

“Although those athletes who receive athletic aid are viewed as the ultimate winners, they typically find the demands on their time, minds and bodies in college even more taxing than the long journey to get there. There are 6 a.m. weight-lifting sessions, exhausting practices, team meetings, study halls, and long trips to games. Their varsity commitments often limit the courses they can take. Athletes also share a frustrating feeling of estrangement from the rest of the student body, which views them as the privileged ones. In this setting, it is not uncommon for first- and second-year athletes to relinquish their scholarships.”

D-III programs aim for more of an **academic/athletic balance**. Undoubtedly, you can get a great education at a D-I school if you're an athlete, but the demands of the sports program will make it that much more challenging. The Division III schools attempt to maximize all three parts of the “triangle,” which are the student's academic, athletic, and social experience at college. Remember Jake, the swimmer? Even if Jake had been a D-I caliber swimmer, he may have still chosen a D-III school to ensure that he would have the time to focus on his academics, particularly given his history with learning challenges.

The Division III philosophy is academic-based with a secondary focus on athletics. This does not mean that we as coaches do not take the athletics seriously. The 'athletic' part of things are the coaches focus, but we do understand that academics is also a very high priority.

Aaron Olswanger, Head Coach, Men's and Women's Cross Country,
University of Redlands

The most highly selective Division III schools have the reputation of being prestigious academically, yet still presenting the college athlete with a good balance between academics and athletics. Even in a very fine Division I academic school such as those in the Ivy League or Patriot League, the time commitment a sport entails at this level may undermine your child's academic experience or, for that matter, your child's overall college experience. ***So how do you know just how demanding any given sports program is?*** This is a tough question to answer because there's no comparative measure, and even within D-III, some programs will be much more demanding than others. Your best tactic is to ask the coach and the other players. Here is a series of questions to consider asking:

For the coaching staff:

- ✧ **How much time is devoted to/what is the schedule for practices?**
- ✧ **How much time is devoted to/what is the schedule for weight training?**
- ✧ **When are the competitions typically scheduled/how often do the students miss class?**
- ✧ **How much travel time is involved?**
- ✧ **What is the off-season training/workout expectation?**
- ✧ **How many credits is it reasonable for players to take per semester?**
- ✧ **In the past few years, how many players have dropped out of the program because it was too demanding of them?**
- ✧ **What are the graduation rates of players in the program in the past few years—what percent of the players graduate in four years?**

And here's one that forces the coach to make a comparative assessment:

- ✧ If you had to compare the demands of your program to the demands of other programs in the same conference or division, would you say your program is more demanding, about the same, or less demanding. If it's more demanding, in what way?

For the other players:

- ✧ Have you had any problems balancing your schoolwork and team commitments? If so, what kind of problems, how did you solve them, and how much support did you get from the coaching staff?
- ✧ How often do you have to miss class and how do the faculty react to that?
- ✧ Does the team commitment take more time, about the same amount, or less time than you expected?

Brother Knows Best

Sometimes kids learn from each other, especially if they have an older sibling who has survived the college recruiting process. In a family of three very athletic boys, the oldest son was a D-I athlete at a prestigious East Coast school. The middle son accepted a full athletic scholarship to play football at a large state university in the Midwest where he learned quickly that playing football at that level leaves no time for academics or a social life. Also that winters there were really cold. Along came the third son—the strongest student of the three. He was a big kid and a talented football player, but after talking with his brother, he knew that D-I football wasn't for him. He was looking for strong academics and a smaller school. He chose an academically oriented D-III school from among the many recruiting him who were anxious to add a 250-pound player with a 32 ACT to their offensive line. ■

• KEEPING SCORE •

- ✓ If the highest priority is *athletic*, keep your list as is, because so far it has been constructed around your child's athletic skills and the role they want to play on their team.
- ✓ If the highest priority is *academic*, trim your list based on the kinds of programs that will let you focus in that way.

