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Rutgers Gets Blitzed

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ABOUT a month ago, as the Rutgers football team rose to 10th place in the national polls, I thought about a student who recently transferred to another college. He'd come to us with a 1570 SAT score. He chose Rutgers for its math and philosophy departments.

But we couldn't keep him. Along with his superb academic credentials, this student played one of the so-called non-revenue sports -- crew, swimming, tennis, fencing -- recently eliminated in the name of budgetary stringency. When the news came, he applied to Yale, M.I.T. and Brown. Accepted at all three, he chose Brown.

The budgetary stringency is real. This year alone, a \$66 million shortfall has led to huge staff layoffs and cancellation of more than 400 course sections. Rutgers undergraduates go to class on a grimy, decaying, traffic-choked campus. Still, the budget crisis hasn't prevented a lavish expenditure on the revenue sports. Estimates of the amount spent on the athletics build-up run from \$250 million to \$300 million.

Recently, the administration announced plans for a \$116 million stadium upgrade with corporate sky boxes. Even such "little" expenditures as the \$88,000 spent on trinkets for boosters and state legislators when Rutgers played in a minor bowl game don't seem so little to those sitting in deteriorating classrooms.

Among faculty, a growing fear is that students like the one who transferred to Brown have begun to avoid Rutgers. It's not an idle worry.

A group of Williams College analysts led by Gordon C. Winston has argued that what is called the theory of peer effects plays a decisive role when talented students are choosing colleges. Such applicants understand intuitively that, as Professor Winston puts it, "students will learn more, think more carefully and perform better by associating with academically strong fellow students."

A corollary holds that very bright students will, whenever possible, avoid universities dominated by unmotivated or actively disruptive students. In recent years, I've heard many colleagues complain that such students are increasingly dominant at Rutgers, where their belligerence and incivility -- arriving late, playing video games, talking on cellphones and sleeping in class -- have become commonplace. In the minds of most faculty members, there's little doubt that

big-time athletics, by attracting students whose idea of "college" is drinking beer, painting their faces and howling obscenities at opposing teams, is a major reason.

Last month, for instance, the president of Rutgers found himself writing a letter of apology to the superintendent of the United States Naval Academy because fans in the Rutgers student section directed obscene chants at the midshipmen during a game. A few weeks ago, a mother of two young boys wrote the student newspaper because she hadn't much enjoyed hearing Rutgers students screaming profanities during a game against Cincinnati, or having her sons watch as the police handcuffed and ejected brawling, drunken undergraduates.

It wasn't always this way. Founded in 1766, Rutgers was long a magnet for serious New Jersey students of modest means. In addition, the school has a history of genuinely collegiate athletics. The first college football game in America was played between Rutgers and Princeton in 1869. For more than a century, its main rivals were teams that today make up the Division I-AA non-athletic-scholarship Patriot and Ivy Leagues. Only in 1994, under pressure from powerful athletics boosters, was Rutgers pushed into the Big East Conference, with its million-dollar coaches, lavish training facilities and elaborate athletes-only tutoring programs.

In the 1990s, worried that Rutgers was on its way to becoming just another Division I-A sports factory, a group of bright and resourceful students organized Rutgers 1000, a campaign to resist the corruption of professionalized college sports. Drawing strong faculty and alumni support, their protest attracted national attention. Rutgers 1000 disbanded only in 2002, when the appointment of a new president convinced the students that Rutgers would return to its core values.

In the years since, however, as the institutional center of gravity has gone on shifting toward big-time athletics, a new generation of intellectually serious undergraduates has once more found itself being shoved to the margins of institutional life.

That's why I was heartened last week when a group of students announced they were reviving Rutgers 1000. Watching the school's rise in the national rankings, they'd seen the defiant crudity and anti-intellectualism of football booster culture become dominant on campus.

More important, these students had glimpsed an essential point: the real issue at the heart of the big-time athletics controversy is a violated ideal of democratic education. To talented students from less-than-wealthy backgrounds, a state university is often the only realistic college choice. But a public university that puts professionalized sports at its symbolic center inevitably draws large numbers of party-animal students who, as they'll be the first to tell you, "hate school."

Poisoned by resistance to real and meaningful education, such a university soon finds itself adding remedial sections, dumbing down its curriculum and watching as its best faculty members depart for better institutions. Outnumbered and abandoned, bright and motivated students have nowhere to turn. Before that happens at Rutgers, the students told me, they are ready to fight.

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