

## *Give athletics credit, literally*

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*The following was presented as a speech to the Princeton University Varsity Club in May.*

As director of athletics, let me share with you what amounts to my athletics commencement address. I hope my theme isn't too sobering, considering the festive nature of this banquet.

At past PVC banquets, a common refrain from many of our speakers and recipients has been that the athletics experience at Princeton is inherently co-curricular. Most, if not all, student-athletes and past participants feel in their collective souls that the athletics experience was every bit as educational as the classroom experience.

Jon Veach, a starting tailback and captain on our football team who graduated in 2005, wrote a paper for Professor Hal Feiveson, in which he stated:

"The reason athletes put so much time and dedication into athletics is because the athletes do not view varsity athletics as simply an extracurricular activity but rather a vital part of their life and an intense learning experience. I have been an athlete since I was 8 years old, and I can honestly say that the summation of my athletics experiences to this point has prepared me for the hard times of my life better than any other experience. Varsity athletics are imbedded with an abundant number of life lessons, values and striking comparisons to the real world. I believe so strongly in these values that I feel varsity athletes should be given some type of academic credit for the countless hours of training and learning."

Jon's comments provoke the question: Is it time for the educational-athletics experience on our playing fields to be accorded the same educational and academic respect as the arts? Isn't it, as I believe, a co-curricular activity, too?

On January 20, 2006, President Shirley Tilghman proudly presented to the board of trustees the President's Arts Initiative, a vision for Princeton that includes an arts neighborhood, expanded programs in the creative and performing arts, and a commitment to integrating those offerings into a broader liberal education.

The president stated that Princeton "fully embraces the creative and performing arts as an essential part of the educational mission." The president further pointed out that "by participating in the arts, our students develop cognitive abilities and forms of intelligence that complement training in other disciplines, and in some cases they discover and develop talents and interests that will shape their careers and principal avocations."

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Paul Muldoon has been appointed by President Tilghman as the new chair of the arts initiative. As Princeton's own Poet Laureate, Professor Muldoon commented that:

"We've come to understand more widely at Princeton that the arts may be central to the experience here — not necessarily overshadowing any of the other areas that a student might pursue — but that there's something about the way in which the arts make us understand who we are and what we're doing that I think has become...more central to the university's idea of itself.

"We will be attempting to make it clear that the arts are central to the life of an educated person, whether she or he might be majoring in chemical engineering or computer science or whatever it might be. One of

the delights of Princeton has to do with the curriculum that allows computer science and chemical engineering and comparative literature majors to write poetry and produce plays.”

Who among us would not agree with President Tilghman’s and Professor Muldoon’s compelling assessment of the arts and the significant role they play in contributing to a broad liberal arts education? But also, who among us does not believe that athletics at Princeton is itself a discipline that tests our physical and cognitive abilities? Athletics competition nourishes our collective souls and contributes to the holistic education of the total person in the same manner as the arts.

In his recent book, “Excellence Without a Soul,” Harvard’s former Dean of the College and professor of computer science Harry Lewis courageously points out the mission drift at Harvard and other research universities from their respective commitments to undergraduate education and teaching. He criticizes the growing academic-educational divide and he also argues for a different professorial rewards system that places a greater value on teaching.

But in his book, Lewis didn’t limit his commentary to Harvard’s role in the academic cosmos. As a former faculty representative to the Ivy Policy Committee on Athletics, Lewis, too, is a proponent of intercollegiate athletics as practiced in the Ivy League and heartily endorses its contributions to the individual and collective soul of a university. He concludes:

“Like scholarship or mathematics or music, athletics at their best operate in a glorious parallel universe in which the lucky and the skilled can temporarily dwell and excel, detached from the banality of ordinary life. Competitive ambitions and financial rewards need not corrupt sports, no more than awards debase the value and purpose of learning or of art. The pursuit of excellence in any area can be more than entertainment — it can be a thing of beauty that brings profound satisfaction to the human spirit.”

In a very real sense, student-athletes are also engaging in a form of the creative and performing arts, but what differentiates us is that we do so in a competitive, collaborative and cooperative way — and like great theater, the anticipated outcomes of our games remain in doubt.

Bill Coplin, professor of public policy at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, professes that “intercollegiate athletics may be the single-most important educational activity available to undergraduates who see college as a way to prepare for a professionally rewarding career, regardless of the field.”

Professor Coplin observes that intercollegiate athletics is almost unique in its ability to help participants develop professional competencies such as critical thinking, time management, teamwork, goal-oriented behavior, competitiveness, confidence, persistence/endurance, loyalty, discipline, taking criticism, dealing with setbacks, leadership, flexibility and adaptability.

If we accept what Coplin affirms, and if we believe that intercollegiate athletics contributes to the development of core competencies and analytical thinking, why is it considered a distant cousin to the arts when it seeks academic legitimacy, even though the vast majority of its participants view it as having educational legitimacy?

No less noteworthy an alumnus than Michael Spence (class of 1966, Nobel Prize-winning economist and a former hockey player at Princeton) said at this very banquet three years ago that the “physical, mental, emotional and social components” of playing hockey at Princeton were a crucial part of his undergraduate education.

To continue on the same theme, George Santayana, the distinguished Harvard philosopher, observed in his 1894 essay entitled “Philosophy on the Bleachers” that:  
“Real loss would come (to the academy) if a merely scientific and technical training were to pass for a

human one, and a liberal education were conceived to be possible without leisure, or a generous life without any of those fruits of leisure of which athletics are one.... (In athletics, there) is a drama in which all moral and emotional interests are...involved."

Which brings me back to the original question: Why isn't the educational-athletics experience in the academy considered to be as worthy of co-curricular respect as the arts? Or even more confounding, why do so many academicians question the legitimacy of the hyphen between "educational" and "athletics" when they evaluate the intercollegiate athletics experience? To the contrary, "Isn't athletics," as Trinity College professor Drew Hyland hypothesized, "the sweatiest of the liberal arts?" You be the judge.

*Gary Walters is director of athletics at Princeton University. He is completing his term this month as a member and chair of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Committee*