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College Sport and Pell Grants

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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All the color and pageantry of college football is about to be unleashed on us again, along with all the NCAA public relations machinery designed to tell us how important college sports have been in building character in modern America. What we won't hear discussed in those NCAA halftime promotional spots will be the details of fraud in Pell Grants, the federal aid program for needy college students.

2.3 million college students receive Pell Grants of up to \$3,000 each year to assist them in paying for their college education. In most respects, an excellent program of federal aid to higher education, it is also the largest such program. As such it is not surprising that it is a program plagued by fraud, much of which goes undetected.

What is less known is that among the leading abusers of the program are university athletic departments. Both in outright cases of fraud and in the legal use of Pell Grants to recruit athletes, athletic directors and coaches have milked the system to supplement their budgets. When the recruited athlete is a member of a minority group, it becomes a way of complying with mandates to increase minority representation in the student body, and athletic departments know this makes university administrators happy, and inclined to look the other way.

Currently twenty-two universities are under investigation by the Department of Education, and most of these schools are major football powers. The General Accounting Office estimates that college athletes have illegally collected \$300M over the last ten years. The most common method of increasing aid is to understate family income, but that is easily detected by matching Pell applications against IRS records. The methods used by athletes are much more sophisticated than that, which has led federal officials to suspect that others are assisting in the fraud.

This investigation is an outgrowth of the conviction of Anthony Russell, an academic advisor at the University of Miami, for fraud involving 91 athletes and \$170,000. Russell, in his confession to the FBI, actually admitted to assisting in Pell Grant fraud for 600 athletes at twenty-six different schools.

Why would an athletic department official or someone working on their behalf engage in this practice? The answer is fairly

simple. In the days of rising costs and stretched budgets any money that can be funnelled to an athlete from outside sources, federal or private, allows an athletic department to spend those dollars elsewhere. If the chances of getting caught are slight, and they have been, then the risk is worth taking.

Although the Department of Education is targeting the big football schools they should also be taking a very close look at Division II and Division III athletic programs. At the Division II level athletic scholarships are limited, and in Division III there are none. This means that financial aid is the only legal means to provide funds to athletes, and as a result the need to maximize Pell Grant funding in these programs is very high. For Division III programs the Pell Grant is often the only source of funding for athletes, and in these programs maximized Pell Grants are often used as a means of recruiting athletes.

The other side of the Pell Grant abuse is perfectly legal, but it is also something that federal officials should look at, because it is not likely that university administrators will move to change their policies. The fact of the matter is that Pell Grants are used by athletic departments to supplement aid to their scholarship and non-scholarship athletes, and that these athletes are given as much legal help as possible to maximize their Pell Grant payments.

I would suggest that a comparative study be done between the scholarship athletes, the non-scholarship athletes, and the general student body which would examine the percentage of students receiving assistance, the levels of assistance, and the advice that is offered each category of student in procuring this assistance. My guess is that such a study would find that athletes receive a disproportionate share of Pell Grant money on most campuses, and that the average student does not receive anywhere near the amount of advice that is given athletes in filling out the paperwork.

The intent of Pell Grants is to provide needy students with assistance in receiving a college education. The program was not intended to provide supplementary income to athletic departments with replacement money. It was not intended to serve athletic departments as a recruiting device. Unfortunately it has become both of these, as well as a program that is being defrauded by athletic departments across the nation.

This is not the kind of education that should be given to athletes during their time at America's institutions of higher

learning, even though such education could be seen as imparting useful real life skills.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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