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## Bridging the Jock-Geek Culture War

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# Bridging the Jock-Geek Culture War

**BRADLEY J. BATES AND CAROLYN A. HAYNES**  
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In his headline address at the Radio and Television Correspondents Annual Dinner last summer, comedian John Hodgman called the strife that exists between “jocks and geeks” the “culture war of our time.” His speech playfully argued that many tensions in American life stem not from differences in politics, culture, race or socioeconomic status but instead from differences in the ways athletic and scholarly types view the world. As directors of an honors and an athletic program at the same institution, we have discovered that each of our programs holds the capacity to freshen the outlook of the other precisely because they seem, on the surface at least, to be so different from one another.

This fact was brought home when, a number of years ago, the two of us served on a committee together. During a discussion over enrollment issues, Carolyn noted her frustration with the pressure that the university was exerting on her program to recruit top-tier students. At that time, the honors program did not engage in recruitment efforts distinct from those of the university, and any student who applied for university admission and achieved a particular standardized test score or graduated with a certain rank was automatically invited to enroll in the program. Rather than offer a critique of the honors recruitment approach, Brad drew from his own experience and simply inquired, “Have you considered focusing on building relationships with prospective students?”

This basic question prompted Carolyn to engage in what Senge et al. call the “capacity to suspend established ways of seeing” (35). Brad explained that the following principles guide the recruitment process of student-athletes:

1. Personalize your communications.
2. Offer students honest assessments of what to expect.
3. Allow students to gain an understanding of the student culture and university community.
4. Ensure that the visits and interactions promote the well-being of the student.

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Guided by stringent NCAA rules, coaches typically sequence through a series of recruitment strategies including an initial academic and athletic assessment during students' sophomore or junior year in high school; cultivating relationships with high school coaches, administrators, faculty, family, and friends; encouraging visits to campus; promoting university assets; continuously sending communication and correspondence; and engaging students in university culture through current and prospective students, coaches, faculty, and staff.

Like their honors classmates, student-athletes make institutional decisions based on a variety of issues. However, the people representing the issues in trustworthy, sincere, and credible ways ultimately establish meaningful relationships that strongly influence university selection. The most powerful relationship initially is between prospective student-athletes and their recruiting coach. Subsequently, spending quality time with potential teammates on campus is critical to student-athlete perceptions of institutional culture and validates impressions of the university as represented by their recruiting coach. Finally, a comprehensive student-athlete recruiting system involves relationships with faculty, staff, administrators and students to further strengthen each prospect's connection with the university. Developing strong relationships serves all participants by verifying communications and data, determining institutional "fit," reinforcing desired experiences and outcomes, and matching student-athlete interests and aspirations with distinct university attributes. When strong relationships work well in influencing university choice, outcomes match objectives. Miami University has seen an eleven percent increase in student-athlete federal graduation rates in the last six years and has closed the academic gap between athletes and the university cohort from thirteen percent to one percent while earning a school record for championships during the 2008–09 academic year.

The relationship-based model of athletic recruitment prompted the Miami University Honors Program staff to develop a high-touch and personalized approach to recruitment. Because the honors program does not have core faculty and is highly student-driven, we decided to place students (rather than coaches) in the role of recruiters or "ambassadors." Approximately sixty students in our program undergo a one-credit training course to serve as ambassadors; in close consultation with our staff, they develop or revise text for our communications to students, are assigned caseloads of prospective students who share similar interests with them, and then develop a communication sequence to implement with their caseload of prospects. The honors staff is able to match the two sets of students by interest through Recruitment Plus, a powerful database operated by the university's admission office, as well as an integrated electronic communication system that invites prospective students to log onto a personalized URL where they can tell us about their interests and

then learn more about how our program can promote these interests. Once the ambassador is assigned a set or caseload of prospective students, she or he develops a personalized communication sequence with each one, typically including a combination of Facebook communications, emails, phone calls, and postcards. Ambassadors also develop and run a series of spring overnight programs and other recruitment events where they can meet their assigned prospective students in person and continue building their relationship.

Since moving to this relationship-based approach, the honors program has seen application numbers, yield rates and profiles of admitted students increase. As a result, we have quickly gained the favor of our university partners. More importantly, however, we have built a stronger community of students and attracted students who are more informed and thus more engaged in the program.

Following our initial communications relating to recruitment approaches, the University Honors Program and the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics have embarked on other collaborations. Brad and Enrico Blasi, the coach of our nationally ranked hockey team, recently led a leadership workshop with first-year honors students, emphasizing the power of teamwork (or “brotherhood”), school spirit, perseverance, integrity, and learning from failure; and we are in the process of planning a joint initiative to leverage the Miami coaches to recruit students from local high schools to the appropriate culture within Miami (athletics, honors, both or other).

Even more importantly, we now see numerous ways that the members of our two programs can learn from one another, partly because our students and staff face many similar challenges and concerns. For example, both sets of students confront stigmatization, battles with perfectionism, and a tendency to defer to authority that might hamper their individuation and development. In addition, athletes and honors students often enjoy special privileges in class registration, academic support and advisement, scholarships, and special housing. We are examining ways to help our students cope with these challenges, transcend assumptions relating to race, class, gender and student abilities, and understand their privileges so that they may grow into responsible, caring, and successful members of our society.

Finally, pressures to recruit the top student prospects and secure success, whether in winning championship games or competing for prestigious fellowships, can create ethical dilemmas and other challenges for both programs. We need to maintain the focus on student learning and development while still meeting the institutional goals of attracting top students and securing accolades. Coaches who must operate under such stringent regulations and honors staff members and students who operate with relatively few rules need to further investigate what they can further learn from one another.

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Although we do not have all the answers, we firmly believe that, through thoughtful exchange among the members of our programs, we can not only overcome John Hodgman's culture war but also serve our students, staff, faculty, and institution in even more meaningful ways. We may thus be able to encourage our students and staff to transcend the "jock-geek culture war," about which Hodgman joked, and to forge authentic friendships and mutual support.

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