

The Student-Athlete

For the Student-Athlete Applying to College or University in the U.S.

If you are potentially a college-level athlete, the whole college application picture may be quite different. In some ways, the process can become simpler than it is for other students; in other ways, however, it is fraught with pitfalls. Remember, *playing sports at Lawrence Academy does not guarantee that you will be recruited at any level*. If you are not a recruited athlete, your sport may not play such a significant role in admission. Here are some questions often asked by aspiring college athletes and their parents.

Where can athletics help a student get in?

First and foremost, be honest with yourself and decide early in the process how important sports are to your college experience. If you believe you must have a legitimate chance to play your sport in order to enjoy college, then you must adjust your college list to reflect your academic record and athletic ability.

If a college coach comes to look at you, and if the coach decides that you are a strong candidate for a college team, then – and only then – can you assume that athletic talent may be a significant factor in getting into college. If you are not recruited, athletic ability will play no more or less important a role in the admission decision than any other seriously pursued extracurricular activity. Period. *Either way, the admission office will make the final decision, not the athletic department*. Colleges have clear academic standards for athletes; there are limits to how far they will “bend.” No college will accept a student on athletic ability alone if it does not think the applicant can do the work.

Athletics at the college level is a business! Coaches are hired and fired because of winning and losing records. Therefore, it is crucial to remember that the college coach is a “salesperson” who cannot always back up promises. *No college coach can guarantee a student’s acceptance to school or playing time once enrolled*. Coaches’ influence varies at each school for each sport.

Who recruits?

Athletes are recruited at all levels of college athletics. However, the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) and the colleges put restrictions on each level of sports (Division I, II, III). The NCAA guidelines for recruiting, as well as the NCAA Eligibility form required of all Division I and II student-athletes, are available online at www.ncaa.org. It is your responsibility to know the recruiting rules. Student-athletes can call a coach during the junior year, but college coaches cannot call students until the summer (July 1) before the senior year. There are a few exceptions, and e-mail contact is allowed.

Here are the several stages of recruitment:

1. Form letters (sent to hundreds of athletes)
2. Personal letters (handwritten)/ e-mails
3. Many phone calls and emails from coaches
4. Scouting (the coach attends a game)
5. College overnight visits. (Division I schools offer five paid “official” visits; many Division II schools also offer some paid “official” visits. The student, however, pays for visits to Division III colleges.)

A student-athlete can get a good idea of the coach’s level of interest from the intensity of recruiting efforts. It is important to remember that athletic ability determines how much support the college coach will give the student in the admission office. *If better players come along, the coach will not help the student get into the college, regardless of what may have been promised earlier.* The Lawrence Academy coaches can usually find out a student’s standing on a coach’s recruiting list by asking how serious the college is and what the athlete’s chances of playing are, but there are no guarantees. However, if you work closely with the College Counseling Office and seek the advice of your coaches, you can find the school that is right both academically and athletically.

Who is a Division I athlete?

Quite simply, coaches, both college and high school, will make that determination – not the student. Thus, if sports will be an important part of your college life, you should have a good, serious talk with your Lawrence Academy coaches early on – during your junior year and again early in your senior year. The elite of the elite (those who will be offered those rare “full rides”) may know by July before their senior year where they are going to college. Other Division I athletes may not know for sure until the spring of their senior year where they will be going. Again, it can be a long process for some Division I hopefuls. Lawrence Academy coaches are experienced at dealing with college athletic departments. You may not always like what you hear from your coaches, but it is definitely in your best interest to heed their advice. If you want to play college athletics, it is crucial to match your athletic ability with a school to which admission chances are realistic and at which making the team is likely. In the final analysis, Division I schools seek only the elite athletes. Division III schools combine studies and athletics in a more balanced fashion. Be honest with yourself now, and you will enjoy your college experience later.

What about athletic scholarships?

A scholarship is money awarded to a student who has a special talent or who meets certain criteria, regardless of financial need. It can be taken away if the student ceases to meet those crite-

ria, whether athletic or academic. Very few athletic scholarships offer a “full ride” anymore to a Division I school. Unless you are a top athlete in your sport, the offers made will likely be “2 for 4” or “3 for 4,” meaning the college will pay for the 2 or 3 years and you will be asked to pay the difference. The same holds true for many Division II schools; the same scholarship rules apply. *Division III colleges offer no athletic scholarships.* Financial aid at this athletic level is awarded based on need only.

Do all Division I and II schools award athletic scholarships?

No. Only certain conferences such as the Big Ten, the ECAC, the ACC, and the Big East have athletic scholarships, and then not even in all sports. The Ivy League *does not* have athletic scholarships. All financial aid at Ivy League schools is based on need only. As in all aspects of your college search, you will need to research the athletic scholarship component of your application.

If you are a recruited athlete, be aware that coaches cannot promise financial aid! They can work on your behalf in the financial aid office, but the final aid offer is always up to them, not the coach. Therefore, beware of promises made before you receive a formal financial aid offer.

What is the NCAA Eligibility Center?

The NCAA Eligibility Center was established to determine academic eligibility for student-athletes in Divisions I and II. All students with an interest in Division I or II programs, and especially those interested in making official visits to colleges in the fall of the senior year, should register online with the Center before leaving at the end of the junior year. These forms are used to certify your academic eligibility according to the core set of courses required by Center standards. The Center has a formula that looks at your test scores and then confirms that you have a corresponding minimum GPA for those scores.

The Ivy League has established a formula similar to that of the Center, known as the “Academic Index,” which takes into consideration your SAT Reasoning and Subject Tests and your GPA. If you do not meet that index, regardless of athletic ability, you will not be admitted to an Ivy League institution. If you meet the Academic Index, you will have met Center requirements, but not necessarily vice versa.

With no athletic scholarships, how do the Ivy League and Division III colleges attract their athletes?

At these schools, in addition to their strong academic reputation, coaches will often use what is called a “squeeze play.” If they really want a student-athlete who meets their respective institution’s academic standards, they will tell that athlete that if he or she applies Early Decision, then

the coach can get them in. What does this mean? Usually coaches in these situations will follow through on what they have said, as their own credibility is at stake. A situation like this will require a student to make a commitment to that institution. (See chapter 7, for more on ED.) For instance, if Brown is your first choice, but the Wesleyan coach makes the ED “squeeze play,” you have a decision to make. Is Brown *really* your first choice or someone else’s? By putting off Wesleyan Early Decision, you run the risk of not being admitted to either! Early Decision is great for athletic coaches and admission offices; they know they will have the student-athlete they want in their classroom and on their teams. You will need to decide if it is right for you. If you think you are in a “squeeze play,” be sure to speak with your Lawrence Academy coach and your college counselor.

What can the athlete do on his or her own behalf?

1. Pay attention to the calendar that we have given you. Know deadlines and what is required of you.
2. Think about different types of institutions available. Consider location, size, and curriculum as it relates to possible career plans, sports, overall atmosphere.
3. Respond to all coaches’ letters, emails and phone calls if interested. If not, it is important to politely tell the coach so in writing or over the phone. His or her feelings will not be hurt by honesty! On the other hand, if the coach applies pressure, tell the Lawrence athletic office and your counselor.
4. Write or call the admission office to ask for brochures and an application to be sent to you. Set a time and date for a tour of the campus if possible. Most coaches will want you to set up your interview with his or her assistance. You can get a tour of any campus without an interview.
5. Take the time to create an athletic résumé. Provide your history with the sport and all teams, clubs or organizations with you have been or are affiliated. List and explain any special honors or distinctions you have earned; any camps, showcases, or programs you will be attending where a coach might be able to see you play.
6. Spring season athletes should seriously consider making a game video in their junior year to send to coaches. Unlike other seasons, by the time senior spring comes around, a student’s performance in a sport will have no influence on coaches and, therefore, no influence on admission. This video does not have to contain full games, but it should show enough for a coach to get a sense of the player’s abilities, both on offense and defense, in a game situation.

7. Know the NCAA recruiting rules! No official contact over the phone or in person can occur until July 1. As of July 1, the coaches can call or visit you at home or at school. See your LA coach for more information.
8. Keep working hard – both in the classroom and on the field (or rink, or cross country trail). Admission directors and coaches expect to see the same grades and effort reported during the application process.
9. Remember, historically, your peers have attended some fine institutions; if you are prepared and listen to advice, good things may happen. Relax and good luck!

In summary:

If a student is recruited as an athlete, as a few Lawrence Academy seniors are every year, college worries may well be over quite early in the senior year. The student will be able to decide among several schools sometime in the fall or early winter. The “downside” of this situation is that colleges’ recruitment efforts can become very aggressive, and it sometimes becomes difficult to determine and decide which college fits the applicant best, academically as well as athletically. Here, another good conversation with college counselors and Lawrence coaches can help. We are all here to help you make a decision with which you will be happy when you are 35 or 50, not merely next year, when you wear a college uniform for the first time.

For the very large number of our students who love sports and would like to play in college, but who do not have Division I ability, we ask that they listen to the advice and opinions offered by Lawrence Academy coaches and the college counselors. It may be appropriate for some student-athletes to ask a coach to make a phone call or to write a letter of recommendation after the application has gone out. Such a recommendation may help make some applicants more attractive candidates, particularly if they have put most of their extra-curricular energy into athletics. Very few, however, should rely on sports to get them into college; it simply will not happen that way.