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Academics and athletics: another piece of a great residential experience

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Great Residential Experience

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Academics and Athletics: Another Piece of a Great Residential Experience



Photo: Evan Gruenes, SJU '14

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* Therese A. McCarty, dean of the faculty and vice president for academic affairs at Union College, in Schenectady, N.Y., makes a good case for the value of athletics as part of a great residential college education. In “Athletics and Academics Can Be a Winning Partnership,” McCarty writes that in the 21st century students will need to understand what it means to be of a place, to be part of a community.

Small liberal-arts colleges like Union have a great record of preparing students in both ways—sending them to study abroad in high numbers and educating them at home in closely knit communities with small classes, in which face-to-face interaction thrives even

as use of social media grows. Athletics can be a great ally in perpetuating the uniquely American, highly effective model of liberal-arts education.

We have certainly seen this at Saint John’s University. In conversations with alumni they regularly talk about the importance of their athletic experiences as part of their overall residential experience. They describe learning about teamwork, leadership, character and friendship, among other things. Thousands of alumni have benefitted in this way, due in part from our exceptional coaches, such as John Gagliardi who coached football and taught for 60 years and Jim Smith who just completed his 50th year as head basketball coach. The longevity and success we have seen at Saint John’s is rare, but the experiences of our student-athletes is very similar to that of others at hundreds of other D3 programs.

What is particularly interesting about the *Chronicle* piece by McCarty, however, is that it is not focusing on Union College’s many D3 athletes, but it’s talking about its D1 hockey program, which just won the NCAA championship by defeating University of Minnesota. It is a great story, maybe not *Miracle on Ice*, but when a true liberal arts college of about 2000 students defeats a hockey power and huge university like Minnesota, it is rare and compelling.

For me however, the more interesting story is why Union College has a Division I hockey program. It is D3 in all other sports. Is the D1 experience as rich as that of its D3 athletes? What are the benefits of the D1 hockey program? Certainly great

press when they, against all odds, win an NCAA championship, but at what price? McCarty argues that the price is small and the D1 athletes have a similar experience. I don't have any specific knowledge of athletics at Union, but I have had conversations with faculty colleagues at another institution that has one D1 program amidst its D3 programs. I have also talked to students and parents in D2 programs who have transferred to Saint John's D3 program.

I have become convinced that almost always programs that are not D3 (small schools with no scholarships) tend to compromise the academic part of a student's experience. It is not about the money typically, though of course D1 football and basketball's problems are often about the money. It is simply about the incentives and objectives of these programs.

In D1 and D2 programs, coaches are judged primarily, if not exclusively, on their won-loss record, with much less weight given to the student athletes' experiences. Competitive coaches who understandably want to move up in their profession are forced to focus on their programs' success as defined by wins. This often, though surely not always, ends up creating an atmosphere where athletics can easily be given priority over academics.

So, while I certainly believe that celebrating the important role of athletics as part of the residential college experience is appropriate and should be emphasized even more at liberal arts schools like ours, I am a D3 snob. I am convinced that it is only in D3 that true student-athletes are the rule and where coaches are more like professors, with a long-term commitment to their institutions, often serving all or most of their coaching careers at single school.

So young men and women who want to place academics first in their undergraduate experience should be looking at excellent D3 athletic programs like Union College (mostly) and places like Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict, among many others.

I'd love to be proved wrong, but I would bet that the excellent hockey coach at Union College will soon be moving on to a more traditional hockey powerhouse and D1 university like Minnesota. The incentives and reward structure of D1 athletics almost demands it, to the detriment of many student-athletes.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | June 9th, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).