

# Final Score at Columbia: Sheepskin 7, Pigskin 6

By Robert E. Pollack

**A**s high school students across the country fill out college applications, some may be concerned about news stories that Columbia purportedly lowered its academic standards to admit promising athletes. Has Columbia in fact lowered academic requirements to bring in students who could play football? No.

We have never admitted students unless we have been convinced that they could succeed. Are there minimum academic requirements to be admitted to the Ivy League? No, again. Each Ivy college sets its own admissions standards.

Seven years ago, the presidents of the Ivy League colleges reaffirmed the place of athletics in their programs. They decided to share scholastic information about their athletes and to adhere to restrictions on the admission of freshmen who might participate on varsity teams. Specifically, all Ivy League schools agreed to consult on the admission of football players whose national test scores fell below an agreed threshold.

Robert E. Pollack is dean of Columbia College.

What has the recent fuss been about? Many people want to believe that some combination of grades, achievement tests and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores will guarantee admission to any of the country's most selective colleges. But this vision of admissions is false. There is no numerical formula that could assure admission to Columbia or to any other competitive college.

This is how the admissions process works. The entering class each year comes with a wide dispersion of S.A.T. scores, from the very highest possible to the sorts of scores one finds in the top fifth of public high schools and the middle third of independent and parochial schools.

This does not mean we lack an admissions policy, nor that we ignore scores. This policy is based on our belief that any curriculum will be inadequate unless each student is obliged to study with and live with classmates of widely differing backgrounds, family incomes, religions and races.

As a consequence, the admissions office does not use scores in national tests as the sole, or even as the major, measure of admissibility.

S.A.T. scores are useful indicators of group success, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient indicators of individual success. In order to under-

stand their meaning, we have to know each young person behind each set of scores. Before admitting anyone, we need to know whether the person is interesting as well as able to do the work.

For example, we must know how well equipped their high schools were to prepare them, how conducive to study were their schools and their homes, what they did with their free time, what talents they had shown, how hard they had worked to complete projects that did not gain them a grade and how interested they were in learning as against scoring well on standardized tests.

We find out whether they love books, ideas, argument, whether they have a musical talent, an athletic talent, a talent for science or poetry or Greek or mathematics. Each year we enroll the economically most diverse

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Academic standards still come first.

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class in the Ivy League, and each year we provide a full-need financial aid package for each student we admit. No one receives any financial aid except for demonstrated need. The results of this policy have been remarkable.

In each of the last six years, we have led the Ivy League in the percentage of entering students of African-American and Hispanic heritage. Each year the quality of our entering class has risen as measured, after the fact, by the usual application of S.A.T. scores and class standing. There is no way for anyone to succeed at Columbia unless he or she brings the intellectual capacity and articulateness necessary for our famous set of required courses, the core curriculum.

Approximately 90 percent of our students graduate, and 90 percent of our football players graduate as well.

We did not change this admissions policy when, three years ago, the Ivy League schools agreed to an across-the-board numerical score based on nothing more than S.A.T. results, achievement tests and high school grades as a threshold for applicants whose talents were athletic. They also agreed to ask each Ivy League college to inform the group after admitting athletes whose scores were

below that threshold. However, Ivy colleges are not required to notify the League when they admit students who are not athletes and who may fall below the threshold.

This meant that the policy that had brought us writers and artists and musicians, young people from all over the country with astounding pasts and bright futures, was subject to the Ivy League presidents' agreement for one set of applicants: athletes. Two years ago and again last year, Columbia admitted a total of 12 freshmen whose talents included athletics and whose scores were slightly below this threshold. These freshmen met our standards in every way.

Confident of our ability to find young men who would have the same expectation of academic success as their classmates, we knew that they, like so many of their classmates, did not have to have the highest scores on entrance in order to be bright and to succeed as students as well as athletes.

As we predicted, they are doing well academically. And as we had hoped, the freshman football team did somewhat better this year than last, going undefeated for the season. This was certainly good news but not so important as the knowledge that our academic standards were untouched. □