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Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 20 (2026), pp. 1-8
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32674/mb33ng57

Beyond the Stadium: Decoupling Institutional Social Spaces from Professionalized Athletics

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ABSTRACT

This article employs analytical autoethnography to interrogate the "sports-industrial complex" within American higher education from the vantage point of an international doctoral candidate and former medical faculty member from India. Utilizing the critical gaze of an outsider-insider, the author contrasts the idealized academic mission of the U.S. university with the unethical financial and physical burdens of intercollegiate athletics. The author argues that while universities hold a mandate to provide robust social spaces for student cohesion, they have no pedagogical or ethical mandate to operate as high-risk commercial entertainment entities. By analyzing athletes' professionalized injury profiles against their amateur compensation and the fiduciary drain on academic budgets, this piece calls for a radical realignment of institutional boundaries.

Keywords: analytical autoethnography, reverse gaze, intercollegiate athletics, bioethics, international student experience, institutional mission, commodification of higher education

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THE ARRIVAL AND THE CULTURAL SHOCK

As an international scholar entering the American academy, my initial perceptions were shaped by a global imaginary of the U.S. university as a sanctuary of pure intellectualism and cutting-edge research. The multiple university websites I had visited online showcased a perfect blend of inclusivity and idealism. I am from the medical education system in India, and the system was defined by limited research, high-

stakes examinations, and a singular focus on rote and pass culture. On the contrary, the American campus represented a "promised land" of holistic development. I arrived on an impeccably clean, beautiful campus and was excited to start my new doctoral journey.

While I was in the phase of acculturation and was experiencing cultural shock and homesickness (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Zou & Fu, 2025), I often noticed how the upcoming game, the last game, the rival university, etc., were always in general conversation among the students and the staff members. So, I thought that sports were important in the culture of my university.

Then, I was invited to a university football game and realized that the stadium was enormous. Everybody was dressed in university colors. From far away, it seemed to me as if the grounds had been splashed with those colors! From earrings to bangles to the university mascot, university colors were everywhere. Tailgaters were in their tents with food, friends, and fun. People had gathered hours before game time, and they were clicking photos with the university mascot and hoping for a win again. They were also shopping for food and souvenirs.

I soon realized that intercollegiate athletics is an American craze, not limited to just a few universities. I discovered that university sports teams have enormous budgets and revenues. My previous idealized image of American higher education was immediately challenged by a phenomenon that felt entirely alien: the gargantuan, almost religious, devotion to intercollegiate athletics.

Even my first encounter with the campus stadium was a moment of profound cultural dissonance. In the Indian context, such immense crowds usually signal a "mela," a traditional festival or fair where community, religion, and commerce intersect. To see this same energy directed toward a ball game on a Tuesday night was my first "Reverse Gaze" (Malhotra, 2011) experience. I was not looking at a sport; I was looking at an institutional identity colonized by a commercial entertainment industry.

International students pursue overseas education for diverse reasons (Tokas et al., 2023), just as American universities gain multifaceted institutional benefits from international enrollment (Laha & Garza, 2026). However, a frequently overlooked advantage stems from the unique perspective of international scholars, such as myself, whose outsider status fosters a critical, analytical lens regarding the practices of American higher education.

METHODOLOGY

I approach this study through analytical autoethnography. As Anderson (2006) defines it, this method goes beyond telling a story; it requires a real commitment to theory and openness about how the research happens.

To keep biases in check, I make my own role visible as a member of the social world I am studying, utilizing systematic reflexivity to manage researcher subjectivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I am not just an observer. As Anderson (2006) notes regarding analytical autoethnography, the researcher must be an active, visible participant in the social world rather than a detached bystander. As an international doctoral student and trained physician, I occupy a complex, fluid "insider-outsider" position that shapes how I gather and interpret qualitative data within distinct cultural and institutional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This vantage point changes how I access institutional practices and, more importantly, how I make sense of them.

To build my data, I relied on systematic reflexive journaling and memos where I could write my questions, findings, and epiphanies as they appeared in my doctoral journey. I also gathered data through field observations of campus athletic events, institutional messaging, and formal and informal professional interactions within academic spaces (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These observations, experiences, and journaling were informed by an extensive review of academic literature on university sports. Utilizing multiple sources of data alongside reflexive journaling significantly improves the trustworthiness, credibility, and structural rigor of a qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Revisiting various

sources of information and reflexive notes leads to an improved depth of interpretation and meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study also draws on the idea of the "reverse gaze," a postcolonial analytic orientation articulated by Malhotra (2011), in which observers from the Global South critically examine institutions typically positioned as universal or exemplary. In this framework, the American university is not assumed to be superior or normatively neutral, but rather, it becomes an object of cross-cultural scrutiny.

Lastly, my professional training in medicine provides a secondary analytic lens to this article. Clinical education emphasizes pattern recognition and risk assessment, while clinical research embodies the ethical principle of nonmaleficence. These professional sensibilities heighten my awareness of injury risk, bodily depreciation, and ethical institutional responsibility. Thus, my interpretive framework unites three domains: (1) analytical autoethnography, (2) reverse-gaze critique, and (3) bioethical reasoning.

I moved iteratively between lived experiences, theoretical literature on the political economy of sport, personal journal and memos, and bioethical reasoning. This iterative process allowed me to create and recreate the categories I use to structure my findings, aligning with qualitative data analysis strategies that move from raw data to conceptual abstraction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Rather than claiming statistical generalizability, I strive for analytic generalizability, illuminating structural tensions through deeply situated experience. The validity of this analysis rests not on numerical aggregation but on conceptual integrity, transparency of the researcher's positionality, and congruence with documented institutional patterns within collegiate athletics.

FINDINGS

The findings emerge from sustained reflexive engagement rather than episodic reaction. Through iterative coding of journal entries, observations, and analytic memos, recurring patterns of dissonance became visible. What initially appeared as personal discomfort and ethical unease at injury normalization, surprise at financial allocation priorities, and confusion about the academic clustering system revealed itself as structurally patterned categories.

In analytical autoethnography, such affective friction is not treated as subjective noise (Anderson, 2006) but as diagnostic data pointing toward institutional contradictions. The themes below represent analytically derived categories that expose tensions between the university's stated academic mission and its operational commitments within the intercollegiate athletic system.

The Clinical Paradox: Professional Risk at a "Peanut Rate"

As a radiologist, I am trained to look beneath the surface to identify structural fractures. When I look at the modern student-athlete, I do not see a "student at play"; I see a professional-grade physical body undergoing professional-grade depreciation.

Epidemiological data indicate that concussions are a persistent risk in elite football at both collegiate and professional levels. Chandran et al. (2022) report concussion incidence rates per athlete-exposure for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes, while Clark et al. (2017) describe concussion rates in National Football League (NFL) games. Kerr et al. (2017) provide a standardized method for calculating concussion rates per athlete-exposure in NCAA sports. Although these studies do not provide directly comparable rates between NCAA and NFL football, they confirm that concussions and structural injuries, such as ligament tears, are naturally anticipated results of participation.

Intuitively, the inherent physics of the identical sport remains the same. Also, collision velocities and rotational forces applied to the head remain substantial regardless of player status. Combined with high-intensity practice timetables and the large volume of collegiate athletes, these factors guarantee that injury remains an inherent challenge at all levels of amateur football.

Duderstadt (2000) highlights a massive structural contradiction at the heart of the modern university. On one hand, schools run what is essentially a high-stakes, professional entertainment business. We see this in the billion-dollar TV deals and the eight-figure coaching salaries. The game itself has changed, too; it is faster, more physical, and more intense than it was decades ago. It is a professional-grade operation in every sense (Duderstadt, 2000; Falak & Custis, 2024).

Recent legal and economic scholarship sharpens this critique. Falak and Custis (2024) examine the implications of recognizing Division I athletes as employees, noting that such a shift would require institutions to assume formal labor obligations, including wages, payroll taxes, workers' compensation coverage, and other employment protections. Falak and Custis argue that the persistence of the amateur designation functions not merely as tradition but as a structural boundary that shields institutions from employment liability while preserving commercial revenue streams.

This is not just a structural paradox; it is an ethical one. Universities have built a professional-grade revenue machine while clinging to an "amateur" framework that serves as a legal shield. It allows the institution to dodge the basic responsibilities of any other high-risk industry, things like labor contracts, collective bargaining, or guaranteed long-term healthcare for the very injuries I am trained to identify. Essentially, the university has scaled profits and physical risks to a billion-dollar ceiling, but it has kept athlete protections at the basement floor (Duderstadt, 2000; Falak & Custis, 2024).

The Conflict of Mission: Social Space vs. Commercial Spectacle

One of the most common defenses of college sports is that they create a sense of belonging. Through Durkheim's (1912/2006) lens, these games are more than entertainment; they are massive collective rituals. These shared experiences act as a social glue, binding students, faculty, and alumni into one unified institutional culture. For a few hours on a Saturday, the stadium transforms thousands of strangers into a single, breathing community.

However, a deep contradiction emerges when these rituals are professionalized. Duderstadt (2000) observes that high-profile athletics have shifted from campus traditions into massive commercial enterprises. While the "feeling" of cohesion remains, the primary logic of the event has changed: it now reflects market priorities, media contracts, and entertainment revenue. As Falak and Custis (2024) highlight, even the players are trapped in this paradox when they are labeled as "students" to protect the university's bottom line, even as they perform in a professional-grade spectacle.

We see this tension in the physical landscape of the campus. Palatial stadium expansions and multi-million-dollar coaching salaries stand in stark contrast to academic departments facing budget cuts. From a Durkheimian perspective, the stadium is still a sacred space, but Duderstadt (2000) and Falak and Custis (2024) suggest that the "sacred" has been replaced by the "profitable." The ritual is no longer about pedagogy or shared values; it is about financial performance. Ultimately, while sport can support social integration, its extreme professionalization introduces a deep ethical rift, and the revenue-driven athletic programs coexist uneasily with the university's educational mission.

The Financial Burden and Institutional Opportunity Cost

Division I athletics, particularly within the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), operates as an escalating "arms race," with continuous growth in coaching salaries, facilities, and other athletic expenditures (Duderstadt, 2000). While a small number of programs generate significant revenue, the majority of athletic departments rely heavily on institutional subsidies and student fees to cover operational costs (Duderstadt, 2000; Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010).

The allocation of resources toward athletics also carries opportunity costs. Funds devoted to luxury facilities or escalating coaching compensation are unavailable for other institutional priorities, including mental health services, graduate housing, or research infrastructure (Duderstadt, 2000). Universities operate

under finite resource constraints, and this tension is further intensified by broader trends in national research investment: federal funding for U.S. university research has declined relative to other OECD nations, raising concerns about long-term research capacity and global competitiveness (Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2025).

Intuitively, these subsidies create a redistribution of costs across the student body. Students who do not participate in or attend athletic events still contribute to sustaining high-profile programs. For international students paying higher tuition, the impact is particularly significant. These dynamics raise important governance questions regarding fairness and institutional priorities and create a "distributive justice" problem. We are essentially taking resources from the many (the general student body and international scholars) to fund the elite few high-profile athletic programs (Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010).

Ethically, the problem is not just about the budget; it is about a misalignment of mission. A university exists to serve its students and the public through education and research. However, when the investment in athletic prestige consistently outpaces the investment in core academic functions, the institution's very identity is called into question.

The STEM Disconnect and Academic Clustering

The literature has also examined the academic consequences of high-revenue sport participation. Drawing on The New Plantation, Hawkins (2010) argues that revenue-generating college sports may reproduce racialized labor dynamics, particularly in football and men's basketball. This framework suggests that athletic labor can be institutionally prioritized in ways that shape academic choices of student-athletes and that athletic labor may be intentionally prioritized over academic development.

Empirical research on major clustering further supports concerns about constrained academic choice (Sanders & Hildenbrand, 2010). Student-athletes, particularly in revenue-generating sports, are disproportionately concentrated in certain majors that provide flexibility around practice schedules, travel, and competition. This pattern suggests that institutional structures, rather than individual preference or ability, play a significant role in shaping academic trajectories of student-athletes.

Comeaux et al. (2017) found a quiet but uncomfortable reality: the rigid structure of STEM disciplines, with their demanding lab schedules and cumulative workloads, creates a massive barrier for Division I athletes. When a sport's time commitment mirrors a full-time job, something has to be sacrificed. Often, it is the athlete's academic ambition in STEM fields.

From my perspective as a physician, this is a profound loss of human capital. We are essentially telling some of the most disciplined, high-performing young people on campus that they cannot be scientists or doctors because the "entertainment product" needs them in the field.

Universities exist first and foremost to educate and cultivate knowledge. Therefore, these universities bear the essential ethical duty of providing all students with meaningful access to the full spectrum of academic opportunities. When participation in revenue-generating sports systematically narrows academic options, universities face a critical question: Do their operational priorities inadvertently privilege entertainment and revenue over intellectual development?

CONCLUSION: INSTITUTIONAL REALIGNMENT AND GOVERNANCE RESPONSIBILITY

The governance of intercollegiate athletics is currently undergoing legal and regulatory transformation. The Supreme Court's decision in *NCAA v. Alston* (2021) and subsequent policy shifts have weakened the traditional amateurism framework (NCAA, 2022). Also, ongoing labor and employment debates signal continued uncertainty regarding athlete classification (Falak & Custis, 2024). Against this backdrop, the central argument of this study is institutional rather than adversarial: universities must clarify the boundaries

between educational mission and commercial sport enterprise. Meanwhile, three principles follow this autoethnographic journey:

- **Professional Proportionality:** If institutions operate high-revenue, high-risk athletic programs resembling commercial sport in scale and intensity, then compensation and long-term health protections should be proportionate to that risk.
- **Mission Integrity:** Universities should ensure that athletic expenditures do not overshadow investment in core academic and student-support functions.
- **Fiscal Transparency:** The use of student fees and institutional subsidies to support athletic deficits should be transparent and democratically accountable.

The university's legitimacy and legacy originate not from stadium capacity or broadcast reach but from its commitment to intellectual development, ethical stewardship, and equitable opportunity. The idea is not to eliminate sport from campus life but to recalibrate its scale, governance, and integration so that entertainment does not overshadow education.

It is also important to recognize the growing population of international student-athletes within American collegiate sport. Nearly 25,000 student-athletes from countries around the world currently compete in NCAA athletics (NCAA, 2025). These students bring diverse perspectives and unique challenges to American campuses. Their presence illuminates the global reach of the sports-industrial complex and highlights the need for policies that support equitable academic and athletic experiences for all students.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.J.; methodology, S.J.; formal analysis, S.J.; investigation, S.J.; writing—original draft preparation, S.J.; writing—review and editing, S.J. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not applicable for this study, as it is an autoethnographic work based entirely on personal reflection and publicly available sources and requires no human subject research protocols.

Acknowledgments: Not Applicable

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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