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The Ultimate Influence

By TAMAR LEWIN
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FORGET college guides, U.S. News & World Report rankings, average SAT scores. The best gauge of an institution's excellence may actually be ... its ultimate Frisbee team. At least that's the theory of Dr. Michael J. Norden, a University of Washington professor of psychiatry.

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Ultimate started in the 60's as the hippie's anti-sport — a coach-free, referee-less, noncontact game combining the free-form elements of Frisbee with the strategy, athleticism and goal-making of football or soccer. Players call their own

infractions, and "The Spirit of the Game," the ruling document, says that while competition is encouraged, it must not be "at the expense of the bond of mutual respect between players, adherence to the agreed-upon rules of the game, or the basic joy of play." More than 500 colleges and universities now have teams competing interscholastically.

Dr. Norden analyzed the Ultimate Players Association "power ratings" of private national universities over a decade (the ratings assess strength based on past performance), and he discovered a startling pattern. "All the schools with above-average ultimate teams also have aboveaverage graduation rates," says Dr. Norden, whose son is, not coincidentally, a serious high school player looking for a university with a good team. "They average a 90 percent graduation rate, while the average graduation rate for private national universities is just 73 percent. Statistically, that just doesn't happen by chance."

Furthermore, the private universities in the top half of ultimate standings had 208 Rhodes and Marshall scholars; the bottom half, just 15. The top seven — Stanford, Brown, Harvard, Tufts, Dartmouth, Yale and Princeton — had almost as many scholars as all the rest combined. (A followup study of public and liberal arts colleges found a similar correlation.) Dr. Norden cites another distinction: "Six of those top seven universities, all but Harvard, made Princeton Review's list of the happiest students."

Why Smart Guys Play Frisbee

In his new study on the correlation between academic excellence and ultimate, Dr. Michael J. Norden explains the attraction:

- Students not known for athletic prowess "can show up at college having never played" and be good at it by year's end.
- The game calls for "spatial aptitude" ("to 'read' the projected path of the disc") and "quick, accurate decision-making" ("a new play must be improvised every 10 seconds").
- "It is readily compatible with a heavy academic load."

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