The discussion tonight focused on the ethics of Intercollegiate Athletics at the American university and at the University of California specifically as a follow up to the discussion at the Arleigh Williams Forum, paying particular attention to the balance between academics and athletics within this sphere.

A good deal of discussion was centered on the poor graduation rates of the football team as shown by the comparison report for the conference last year. It was noted that the graduation rates were much lower than that of the rest of the campus, and many Fellows took part in thinking of the cause. Some Fellows were very clear that the blame shouldn’t lie on the student athletes, but rather on the coaches, staff, administration, and institution at large as the cause of the graduation rates. While some Fellows saw recent improvement in the Athletic Study Center and related academic support systems for students, and also in the incentives offered for success in the classroom, many Fellows concluded that the bottom line comes down to whether priorities are placed on academics by the coaching staff and the institution, and if those priorities are then enforced.

A provoking topic was presented when Fellows questioned the viability of Intercollegiate Athletics in its current model at the Division 1 level. Fellows pointed out the finite financial resources available for recruiting academically-achieving yet top-notch athletes, and some Fellows began hinting at whether a choice will have to be made. Given California’s finite financial resources for IA, will it be able to compete athletically at a high level against other schools with larger endowments and thus can retain both academic and athletic excellence (i.e. Stanford) or other schools that do not emphasize academics over athletics so strongly. It was noted that the University might eventually need to make a decision and decide what it’s identity will be.

Along a similar vein, some Fellows focused on the significance and the singular role Intercollegiate Athletics, and football in particular, offer in unifying the campus community behind the University, and pointed out that a Division 1, prominent athletic environment and level of competition is a large part of Cal’s identity and is a reason many people consider in enrolling here. Other Fellows suggested that we (and all Californians for that matter) must focus on what “CAL” is
and should look like, and see how IA and football fit into that ideal, as opposed to seeing football as the end-all. Additionally, it was pointed out that if our large, Division 1, revenue-producing sports were “scaled-down,” there could arise the issue of funding for the multitude of other very successful Division 1 programs which are not revenue-producing.

In regards to staying competitive in athletics while not compromising academic standards, several Fellows pointed to other “non-revenue” sports who’s athletes achieve at a high academic level that could perhaps serve as a model for sports less academically successful. Other Fellows brought up, however, the differences in environment, the competitiveness of recruiting, and the resources required for such recruiting that could impact revenue-producing sports to a higher degree than other programs.

Fellows also pointed to the College of Engineering, which does not consider athletic offers in its admissions. Some fellows asked why this standard isn’t held by more departments, or even all departments on campus? How does the University ensure student viability in specific departments outside of Engineering, for example? A discussion followed regarding incentivizing graduation by making athletic scholarships into kind of ‘loan,’ which is forgiven if an athlete graduates in six years, for example.

Though discussion could have continued on this complex and engaging topic, the meeting was adjourned in the usual manner.