When I got off the phone with Allen Sack, after he had informed me that I was the recipient of this year’s Robert Maynard Hutchins award, my first sensation was one of humility. So many past winners of this award have been truly heroic figures, people whose risk-taking and fortitude I have personally found inspiring and intimidating. I have seen up close what Mary Willingham has endured, but virtually all previous Hutchins award winners have suffered serious indignities at the hands of their respective institutions. I just don’t rate. To date, I haven’t been fired or demoted (and I don't mean to make light of the suffering of my colleagues). So my first thought on talking to Allen was that I am not worthy to be in such distinguished company. My second sensation was sheer terror. Because I realized I was going to have to give an acceptance speech. I thought a lot about what I should say today. Should I talk about Hutchins the athletics skeptic? (He once said that "when I feel like exercising, I just lie down until the feeling goes away.") Should I talk about the UNC case? That I decided I just couldn't face. So instead I’ve decided to talk about both very big issues and very small issues. The larger issues have to do with education and our duties as educators. The smaller issues have to do with my own personal experience as a student, which is, I think, oddly relevant to the larger educational issues that big-time sport programs are just now beginning to confront.

You see, I am a first-generation high school graduate. Not college, high school. My father was a coal miner’s son who grew up in a West Virginia company town buying groceries with scrip, learning to sing gospel music at the community church, and sleeping in a company-owned house with six siblings and two hard-working parents. He escaped a life of deprivation only after joining the army, which introduced him to the concept of three square meals a day and made it impossible for him to go back to his former life. After his term in the army he moved to Chicago and found good work in a plastics factory, where he made his career. My mother was the daughter of a dirt-poor Alabama farmer who lost his farm to indebtedness just as my mother entered adolescence. Buckling under the stress, her father was unable to hold the family together. With her mother and sister my mom moved to Chicago in 1941. There she would meet my dad.

My parents were sharp people with a great deal of native intelligence. But their formal schooling ended about halfway through high school. As adults, they made a reasonably comfortable life for themselves, since it was still possible to do that in the immediate post-war era, even without diplomas or degrees. And they also somehow had the good sense and foresight to see to it that I grew up with the expectation that I would someday go to college.

But my parents, God love ‘em, had not the faintest idea how to get me ready for college. There were no SAT Prep classes for me, I can assure you. No fancy summer camps. No tuition fund. (Every dollar of my education was paid for through student loans.) Nor was any thought *ever* given to my high school curriculum. I loaded up on music courses, I quit French after my sophomore year (I would have to make up for a lot of lost ground later), and I took only one AP course in HS—mainly because friends were taking it. When it came time to *apply* to college, it never occurred to my parents, or to me, that I might want to consider several schools. We just took it for granted that I would go to the nearest state University campus. Going to the local university seemed to them a great step in itself. And indeed it was. The great genius of American higher education is that fine colleges and universities are scattered all across the nation, in every state of the union. Since the second half of the 19th century, America has invested heavily in higher education, and the fruits of that investment can be seen everywhere. Bright, motivated children of the working class, or of any class, really can get a great education almost anywhere if given the chance.

So at eighteen I went off to college. But like *many* students who come from environments where college is not the norm, where it is *not* part of the collective experience that gets shared around the dinner table, I arrived on campus—this was at Towson University, in Maryland—and quickly came to feel out of place and overwhelmed. My basic skills were OK, but I really had no idea how to study. (I never even owned a backpack as an undergraduate. I never took a note while reading until I was in graduate school; I never owned a highlighter.) In my first few semesters I was thoroughly intimidated by my professors, to whom I rarely spoke. I was disengaged in class, never interested in the material. I floated along and went through the motions, and my performance reflected it. I got a D in Physics. I pulled down C's in American Lit, Intro to Philosophy, Music Theory, and freshman composition. (My grad students sometimes get a kick out of that last one, since I'm a bit of a perfectionist as a stylist, and I *really* beat them up over it; but this was another time.) My GPA at the end of my freshman year was a robust 2.2. You might say, and you would be right, that I had come to college unprepared, not ready to make the most of it. Had my sophomore year proceeded as my first year had, it’s likely I would have just dropped out of school. I *could* still envision life without a college education, after all. My parents had done it. My older brother had done it. Most of my extended family had done it. I thought, eh, maybe college isn’t for me.

But lucky for me, something clicked in my sophomore year. After abandoning music, I cast about looking for other subjects. I spent a semester thinking I might be a business major. (Another bad grade in another less-than-gripping course showed me the error of my ways.) But in my third semester as a college student, still nursing my barely 2.0 GPA, I also took a course in European history—Towson’s version of Western Civ. I took the course on a lark, because my best friend was also taking it; we both needed a 2 o’clock class--and I'm not lying about that. But when the semester began and I took my seat I finally got excited, for the first time, by the content of a college class. I had had only American history in high school, so Europe was sufficiently exotic to make me feel like an interplanetary explorer that semester. Our professor spoke in a thick German accent, which probably helped. It was all so alien, so unfamiliar, and so…unexpectedly stimulating. The Reformation made a particular impression. Consequently, after proudly collecting my B in that Western Civ course I next took an advanced course on the history of the Reformation. And it was in this course, which I took at Northern Illinois University after having transferred from Towson (basically because my family had transferred to Illinois for work reasons), that I really turned a corner.

In that Reformation course I bonded with the professor, David Wagner, who was a delightfully quirky character fully immersed in the world of ideas. He modeled a passion for intellectual work that was both idiosyncratic and alluring. His class was a hard one, the reading load fearsome. My writing was still far from refined, but I at least began to turn in earnest work that reflected a lot of effort. I got a B on the first paper and I began pushing myself to meet the professor’s high standards.

This course met on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule, and at one point fairly early on in the semester I had to miss two consecutive class meetings. (This may seem like a trivial anecdote, but it's not.) I can’t remember why I missed the Tuesday class, but a serious snow storm derailed my commute on Thursday; I couldn’t make it to campus. (I never lived on campus as an undergraduate; my parents couldn't afford it.) This was in the era before email, so I didn't even bother to notify the professor in advance about my absences. When I finally reappeared in class, he said as I walked in the door, “Mr. Smith, we’ve missed you. I do hope there won’t be any more absences.” I was mortified. This was a small seminar course, and Wagner had called me out in front of everyone. I stammered some sort of apology and sat red-faced through a discussion of the Augsburg Confession. I did not miss another class, though, and after the embarrassment receded I appreciated that a professor had noticed my existence. (It's why I remember the event so well to this day.) He had obviously detected in me some small bit of potential. He wanted to make sure I was in it for the long haul.

In the end I got an A in Wagner’s course, and he was a constant source of support for me in the years ahead. Next I discovered early-modern French history, which happens to be my own research specialty. My first exposure to French history came in a course taught by a brilliant teacher, one of the nation’s leading experts on the French aristocracy. (This is another reminder, by the way, that there are unexpected intellectual riches waiting to be discovered by students on every campus in America. You don’t *have* to be at Harvard.) The professor for the early-modern France course, William Beik, also pushed me. I put in more than my share of all-nighters writing papers for Beik—I’d like to think I set some sort of NIU record—and I can still remember the dread I felt when he returned our papers to us in class. I *so* wanted to impress him. In general, I think I did, but every critical word, every correction from Beik, was like a dagger to the heart. I worked my tail off in that class, and in other classes I took with him, but I never minded the work. Almost without noticing it, I had become absorbed in the learning process, and I was so excited to engage these past worlds that he so expertly brought to life that I only wanted more.

By my junior year I had found my groove. Although I was also working 20-30 hours a week at a part-time job, and although the daily commute between Dekalb and Aurora often left me worn out, I was happy as a clam. I now talked to my professors with confidence; I enjoyed making progress with my writing; I began to develop my own critical perspectives on all sorts of things, and my grades were suddenly through the roof. My professors and I decided that I should consider graduate school, and they helped me strategize over my long-term plans. When I landed a prestigious fellowship to attend Michigan’s highly regarded Ph.D. program after taking a Master’s at NIU in the mid-80s, my mentors in Dekalb were as proud as I was. By the time I arrived in Ann Arbor, I was on the path that would lead me to a rewarding and successful career as a historian, at a 'public ivy' no less.

At nineteen, at the dawn of my sophomore year in college, I was aimless, unmotivated, unsophisticated, and drifting. The future looked dim and uncertain. Confronting the proverbial fork in the road, at that point I could easily have reverted to the family pattern, one that would have likely consigned me to a life of financial insecurity and would certainly have imposed more constricting cultural horizons on my adult experience. The opportunities lost, had I made the wrong choice and dropped out, would have limited, in turn, the possibilities open to my children. I *know* that I almost went down that road; still today I see others in my family, people very close to me, treading a very different, hardscrabble path. I continue to feel guilty about the distance between us, because I know that at the age of nineteen I too was peering into a limited future.

Yet two years later, at the age of twenty-one, I was an entirely different person. How did this happen? The sheer abundance of intellectual victuals at American universities—and my freedom to sample from the menu, to explore, to make my own choices—*helps* to explain how I came to have the life I have today. But far more important to the outcome of my story is the kind of help I received along the way. I needed to be brought along, I needed to be challenged. More than once I needed to be reassured that I could do it. (One professor at NIU, Harvey Smith, counseled me a lot about grad school. I remember him saying to me at one point, ‘Jay, why do you keep asking whether this is really possible?’ But I needed to hear him say it, over and over again.) I needed patient but demanding instruction, I needed sophisticated people to address my various deficiencies (telling me how certain words were *really* supposed to be pronounced, for example.) I needed experts from academic world—which was *so* not my world—to show that they believed in me.

And at NIU, and then later at Michigan, I got more high-level, dedicated teaching than a person has a right to expect. Sure, I had found the subject—European history—that *pointed* me in a new direction, but an array of wonderful teachers reached down, allowed me to latch on, and they pulled me up toward the light. They invited me to reach for their standards, and they also showed me how to get there. And they changed me. To paraphrase Robert Maynard Hutchins, "they unsettled my mind, they inflamed my intellect." That was Hutchins' definition of a real education.

And that brings me to the moral of this tale. Higher education has the capacity to *transform* lives. For me, college was not the place to make up my mind whether to pursue medicine or law or the family business. It wasn’t simply the place to acquire a little cultural capital to facilitate professional ambitions. College was certainly not, in my case, the place to learn the techniques of wealth management. No, for me, college meant access to a different *kind* of life, an enriched life, a life of ever expanding horizons.

My experience as an unprepared, teetering, undergraduate who finally made good—who had his life changed by an inflamed intellect—has deeply informed my activism over the past few years. Athletes, as everyone in this room knows, are too often denied access to the transformative experience of a genuine university education. And it’s not just the underprepared athletes we’re talking about—though they're the ones for whom I feel a special affinity. A great many college athletes, particularly in the revenue or profit sports where hyper-professionalization has overtaken the enterprise, are subjected to a form of bondage that restricts their range of motion and limits their opportunities. Harnessed to the disciplinary regimes of their coaches and caught in the gears of the eligibility machine constructed at their institutions, they are forced to subordinate their academic needs and interests to the needs of their sport.

I don’t mean to ruffle feathers with this next big generalization, but it needs to be acknowledged. Athletes are advised by people who generally are not academics, and who therefore do not have the experience or the instinct to detect the warning signs of substandard pedagogy or degraded classroom expectations; indeed, many have learned to be grateful for signs of low expectations because of the eligibility demands they and their charges must keep foremost in mind. Too many athletes are funneled to the same fluff classes, the same majors, and the same friendly faculty who perversely “protect” them from the academic grind. They are led through a shadow version of the true university curriculum that their non-athlete classmates explore freely and through trial and error—as I once did.

The shadow is an apt metaphor. Like the cave dwellers from Plato’s famous allegory, large numbers of recruited scholarship athletes in football and basketball have been denied access to the light. Strapped into place by relentless scheduling demands and an intense pressure to perform physically at the highest level--and also sometimes dealing with learning deficits that go largely unaddressed--they see only the dancing shadows of their puppeteers on the wall of the cave where they are chained. Controlled by their handlers and kept always on task, they live in a segregated educational space where they are denied a glimpse of the real—the real mind-stretching possibilities of intellectual exploration, of the uniquely elevating experience that is higher education in America.

I have become convinced that it is up to us—the educators, the people who are supposed to be in charge at universities—to liberate athletes from their peculiar form of bondage, to lead them out of that darkened cave and into the sunlight. They need our help. They need our expertise, they need *our* dedication to *their* best long-term interests. We need to lend them a hand, sometimes reaching pretty far down, so that they can gain an intellectual perch from which to launch their own voyages of exploration. And we need to *push* them. This is our duty. We are educators. We don’t *process* people through bureaucratic hurdles. We don’t just hand out diplomas. We transform lives.

To carry out this mission, we’re going to have to make a concerted effort to free up athletes’ time, to sharply reduce their insane travel and practice schedules. (Spring football? Abolished I say!) We’re going to have to work with coaching staffs and AD’s to rearrange their priorities. The word student comes before athlete in that famous compound term, and *if* they are students they are ours; they’re not the property of the athletic department. We’re going to have to ensure that scholarship athletes in football and basketball, and in all sports, have access to the same opportunities that non-athletes take for granted—study abroad, internships, research opportunities, late afternoon classes for crying out loud. We have to give some the remedial support they need; if we admit them, we take care of them. We’re going to have to seize control of the academic advising apparatus. No more courses or majors should be selected by people whose first responsibility is NCAA compliance. Here’s what I’d like to tell the NCAA: you comply with US. We faculty will determine what a real education consists of, and what eligibility means.

When the faculty in this country make up their minds actually to educate everyone—everyone—who gains admission to their respective institutions, and to brook no interference from people consumed by other priorities, the nonsense will stop. We, the guarantors of the educational credentialing process, have the power to impose order on this cockamamie system. We can ensure that athletes, too, may have the chance to pursue a PhD in French history. Or, since there are few jobs in that field, to become teachers, artists, doctors, archaeologists, nurses, inventors, musicians, heck, even lawyers. And while we go about organizing the coming coup, principled and visible faculty reform groups should be providing safe havens and vocal campus support for whistleblowers all across the country. Real reform will happen, if it is ever to happen, because of the determined action of fed-up faculty. So here’s my final word. I’d like to think that my own experience as a *most* *unlikely* academic success story can remind all of us that it is not our job to print diplomas. It is our job to transform lives through higher learning. And for the sake of the athletes, we need to rededicate ourselves to that job. Thank you.