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Exploring Perceptions of the Role of Athletics in  
NESCAC Schools following *Reclaiming the Game*

**Introduction and Research Question:**

The New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) is currently in its thirty-sixth year of athletic competition since its inception in 1971. The original goal of the conference was to gather together a group of highly selective colleges, which are committed to achieving athletic success without detracting from their high academic standards. The Mission Statement of the conference echoes this idea as it says, “[the] members are committed first and foremost to academic excellence and believe that athletic excellence supports our educational mission.” However, it also continues on to say that “students on all intercollegiate teams are to be representative of the overall student body and are admitted with the expectation of their full participation in the life of the college (NESCAC Mission Statement).” As college athletics have grown significantly over the last half-century so has a concern over whether their importance is overshadowing that of traditional academia.

Several books have been written on the subject of the impact of college athletics on traditional academia including *The Game of Life: College Sports and Educational Values* (2001), but the only one that looks at the NESCAC in particular is *Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values* (2003). The authors of *Reclaiming the Game*, William Bowen and Sarah Levin claim that there is a significant difference in the

NESCAC in both the admission and academic performance of athletes versus the rest of the student body. They call this disparity the academic-athletic divide, which showed that the schools of the NESCAC were not holding to the original principles in gathering together a group of selective institutions for athletic competition without detracting from their academic prowess. The authors of both *Reclaiming the Game* and *The Game of Life* defined a few key terms that I will use here as well in my project. They used the term “athlete” to talk about any student who played a varsity sport for at least one year. For any other student who did not participate in a varsity sport the authors called them “students-at-large.” Throughout my project, I will talk about the perceptions of the interviewees based upon what the athletically affiliated administrators saw on their campus; this is juxtaposed with the perception of the academic-athletic divide, which is the belief that there is only the thought of a divide throughout the community rather than actual proof.

My research asks: After the reports were published in *Reclaiming the Game* in 2003 stating that there is significant academic-athletic divide prevalent in the NESCAC, what is the reaction by some of the faculty in the NESCAC to these findings? Do they perceive there to be an academic-athletic divide at their school, and if so what can be done to help close the gap between athletes and students at-large? Also, what have these schools done in attempt to make changes to their policies or practices? If any of these schools conducted their own study, did their findings agree with or contradict those of the authors of *Reclaiming the Game*, Bowen and Levin?

**Thesis:**

Although the evidence from both *The Game of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game* state that there is a significant academic-athletic divide among the member institutions of the NESCAC, the athletically affiliated administrators that I interviewed did not believe that there was such a divide at their schools. They believe that the perception of such a divide is far greater than the actual circumstances, although they did state that a minority of athletes may support this stereotype by their actions. Also, they claimed that all eleven NESCAC schools completed their own follow-up study after the reports in *Reclaiming the Game*, and stated that their data did not correspond with the results given by Bowen and Levin. Although each school reduced the number of allotted slots for entering freshmen students based upon their athletic abilities, none of the schools in the NESCAC have taken drastic measures such as the elimination of recruiting as suggested in *Reclaiming the Game*. However, in the end, the athletically affiliated administrators whom I interviewed stated that the academic-athletic divide is something that needs to be looked at carefully in order to be most beneficial for the entire community. In order to do so, a suggestion that was often reiterated was that each member of the institution including coaches, athletes, professors, and all of the student body needs to integrate themselves together more often to help eliminate the perception of an academic-athletic divide.

### **Significance and Literature Review:**

One of the biggest questions in higher education today involves what kind of role athletics should play in college life. As the importance of athletics has grown tremendously in our society, college athletics has grown with it; in turn, the conversation on whether athletics is taking away from the educational mission of higher educational

institutions or is it contributing positively to campus environment has increased as well. There are proponents to both sides of the issue that believe college athletics is an essential learning tool in academia and it should be left alone; while there are others who believe that is becoming over-emphasized and is hurting the academic development of athletes and students at large. In *The Game of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game*, the authors state their case for the latter side of the argument. My research helps to gauge the perspective of the people who deal with academics and athletics on a daily basis. I hope that my research gave my interviewees a voice to express their views to this conversation which otherwise have not been stated.

In *The Game of Life* authors William Bowen and James Shulman showed that athletes receive admission advantages and perform far below students at large at a number of universities and colleges throughout America. The authors presented data, which substantiated their argument by showing through SAT scores that recruited athletes receive a greater admission advantage versus the rest of the student body. They also illustrated that recruited athletes performed far below their fellow classmates based upon GPA's of these two groups. Another important statement that the authors made was that throughout all their statistics, they showed how this gap was growing over the last few decades and began to include women's athletics as well as their male counterparts. In the end, Bowen and Shulman concluded that in addition to many other aspects of college athletics, the extremely active and growing recruitment process led to the increasing academic-athletic divide.

This study included a few NESCAC schools, but not a large enough number to satisfy the Presidents of these prestigious institutions. The request from the leaders of the

schools, along with the national attention from *The Game of Life* led Bowen and Levin to conduct a follow-up study that resulted in the publication of *Reclaiming the Game*. This new study concluded that not only was the NESCAC guilty of having the same academic-athletic divide, but it was actually more prevalent among these highly prestigious liberal arts institutions. The authors stated "...the typical recruited athlete in NESCAC had slightly more than *twice* as good a chance of getting in as did other NESCAC applicants with similar credentials" (Bowen and Levin, 77). Another main finding of *Reclaiming the Game* stated that male and female athletes held a class rank far below students at large (Bowen and Levin, 147). The authors emphasized these two points throughout their study that not only were athletes receiving a great admission advantage but they also were not taking full advantage of the education that a top liberal arts college can offer.

The authors of *Reclaiming the Game* also concluded that the recruitment of athletes was the main factor in causing the disparity between athletes and students at large. Among other suggestions, the authors proposed that that NESCAC take drastic measures to adhere back to their original mission statement that each athlete is representative of their entire student body. These two books provide background information for my study, which seeks to provide follow-up research as to what has been the response of both athletically affiliated administrators and the institutions of the NESCAC, if anything, in response to Bowen and Levin's findings in *Reclaiming the Game*.

Two other books that look at the role of athletics in higher educational institutions in our society are *Beer and Circus: How Big Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education* by Murray Sperber and *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big*

*Time College Athletics* by Ronald Smith. As indicated by their titles, these books explore the same issue of the role of athletics in higher educational institutions, but do so at larger Division I schools. Both of the authors, Sperber in *Beer and Circus* and Smith in *Sports and Freedom*, do not take a quantitative look at the role of athletics in higher education, but rather look at the impact on college life as a whole qualitatively. This difference in their methodology is very important for my research because instead of exploring numbers, they look closer at the environment, which correlates directly to my project.

Although both Smith and Sperber look at the impact of college athletics in “Big-Time” universities, they do so in opposing ways. Sperber focuses on the beginnings of college athletics at its inception and then examines the ramifications of developing into commercialization and professionalism. Smith discusses more closely the academic issues that have arisen from Big-Time athletics at large universities. While very closely related, Sperber views the transition of athletics through higher education as opposed to Smith who views undergraduate education through intercollegiate athletics. However, they do agree in the end with a generalized notion that the environment surrounding Big-Time college athletics needs to be changed because of its negative effects. They both base this opinion on the growing importance that sports have taken in our society and overtime has trickled down into college athletics.

### **Methodology:**

In most studies, researchers use quantitative data to back up their arguments. *Reclaiming the Game* and *The Game of Life* use this method as well to contend that schools of the NESCAC and many other higher educational institutions have an increasing academic-athletic divide on their campuses. However, for my research project

I wanted to move away from this approach and hear directly from athletically affiliated administrators themselves who deal with academics and athletics on a daily basis.

Through this qualitative data, I made use of the first-hand accounts that my interviewees conveyed to me in sharing their opinions and perceptions regarding the academic-athletic divide in the NESCAC.

I interviewed a total of seven athletically affiliated administrators from four of the schools in the NESCAC. I conducted interviews, which last approximately forty-five minutes each with four Athletic Directors, an Administrator in the NESCAC office, an Associate Athletic Director, and a Professor who is a faculty liaison to one of the sports teams at his respective school. I was able to tape record and then transcribe each interview in order to use direct quotes through my research project. I made contact with my interviewees through either email or telephone conversations in order for them to understand the questions I was looking to explore and also to make sure that they had an understanding of the results made by both *Reclaiming the Game* and *The Game of Life*. Through this process each potential interviewee that I asked to participate was very enthusiastic about discussing this subject matter because they expressed how it impacted their occupations directly.

Before each interview, I reiterated to the interviewees that I would use pseudonyms for both their names and the names of their institutions in order to protect their confidentiality. In addition, I had them sign an "Informed Consent" form that restated these thoughts but also gave me permission to use their statements in my research project. Through the interviewing process I tailored the questions to the interviewees based upon their background in higher education and athletics. There were a



few key questions that I asked to each subject but in order for a quality conversation to be had I felt a need to alter some questions interview by interview. The few questions that I have kept the same throughout the interviewing process include: As someone with your background in higher education and athletics, what was your initial reaction to reading *The Game of Life* and more importantly *Reclaiming the Game*? Has there been any policy changes or recommendations made at your school since the publication of *Reclaiming the Game*? What, if any, changes should be made to help bridge the gap between athletes and students at large?

### **Analysis and Interpretation:**

Like I mentioned before, the athletically affiliated administrators that I interviewed echoed the same thoughts to me: despite what the authors of *Reclaiming the Game* state about the academic-athletic divide in the NESCAC, they do not believe that there is the same kind of divide at their school among the student body. I have grouped together their thoughts in three different categories including their initial perceptions, institutional responses, and what can be done to help eliminate any divide. I was also able to find very pertinent information through a variety of other questions and responses including discussions my interviewees had in various NCAA committees outside of the NESCAC about the results of *Reclaiming the Game*.

The athletically affiliated administration that I interviewed observed that the perception of the academic-athletic divide was more prevalent in their community than the actual divide itself. Mr. Henderson from Cedar College echoed these thoughts when he said “I think [the academic-athletic divide] is something that deserves discourse every year; but in the end the divide is only as big as the perception.” The cause of this

perception is not known but could be found in the term “dumb-jock,” which has been floating around in our society for a number of years but still is common today. However, in the end there has to be something contributing to this divide whether it comes from personal experience or solely through hearsay. As Ms. Hackley from Berry College put it, “Perception may not be reality but there is something feeding that reality that we have to be aware of in order to help eliminate it.” Although the athletically affiliated administration did not buy into the academic-athletic divide at their respective school in the NESCAC, they did believe there was a perception of a divide that may be a contributing factor to the actual divide itself.

One of the thoughts that the athletically affiliated administrators reiterated is that the authors inherently assume that there is no educational value in athletics. The authors of *The Game of Life* and *Reclaiming the Game* state that they are fans of collegiate athletics and claim that they are involved deeply in this culture with many family members participating in NCAA competition. However, they turn around and state that academics and athletics are two separate entities on a college campus and have no relation to one another. One of the athletically affiliated administrators stated that “[The authors] assume that there is no educational value to sports...they don’t think of it as educational. I think that they dismiss this fact far too easily.” By believing this, the authors are feeding into the biases and stereotypes that are often held against those who play athletics. In addition they are neglecting the Mission Statement of the NESCAC, which states that it is the belief that athletic excellence supports the educational mission of each of the members of the NESCAC (NESCAC Mission Statement). Through this statement early in their study, it shows that the authors treat athletics as “extra-curricular”

rather than “co-curricular,” which contradicts the beliefs of the conference that they are studying.

The athletically affiliated administration also pointed out the flaws that they felt were prevalent in *Reclaiming the Game*. They first thought it was unfair and possibly against traditional research practices to begin a study with a particular objective in mind, to prove that athletes are not representative of the student body. One of the interviewees reaffirmed this idea as Ms. Oslow at Jefferson College said, “I thought it was unfortunate in the data that they chose to do the route they did. My sense in both books there was an agenda underlying form what they selected met their needs for faming. They very easily could have went a different route but they chose to focus on the negative because that’s what their agenda was from the beginning.” The interviewees also believed that another unwarranted claim that the authors made was in the fact that athletes seems to gravitate towards one particular major, the social sciences. Although they questioned whether this was actually true at their respective school, the main question lied in what does this actually mean? Mr. Yearly at Berry College said, “The authors incessantly point out that athlete’s major in social sciences...well so what? Is there something wrong with majoring in the social sciences? They would never dare say that it is the easier path, but that is what they are assuming by claiming this.”

An additional query that the athletically affiliated administrators had was aimed at how the authors made their claims. It began with the belief that Bowen and Levin only showed one side of the argument and could have made a deeper connection if they brought in another perspective to contribute to the conversation. However, the main concern with their claims is that they used single pieces of data to support a larger claim.

Ms. Anderson, an administrator of the NESCAC believed that this took away from some of the validity of the book. She stated, “I think there are a couple points in there that may be very valid but in some cases they use anecdotal evidence from one institution to make a broad claim about the whole conference.” As she says, by making large claims without the right evidence to back it up, they opened themselves up to even more questioning about what other pieces of information could be skewed as well.

All of the schools in the NESCAC conducted their own independent study in comparison to the research done in *Reclaiming the Game* in order to see if their school indeed followed the same path that the authors’ stated. The athletically affiliated administrators that I interviewed who had knowledge of the results of these studies said that the data from their research did not match that in *Reclaiming the Game*. The results of the independent studies showed that their athletic teams were not performing far below the rest of the student body as Bowen and Levin claim. They stated that especially with GPA’s, the average of some athletic teams may have been a step below the mean of the school; however there was also other teams whose cumulative GPA was above the average of the school. The interviewees also found that conducting an independent study at their college was beneficial in some ways to help eliminate the perception of a divide. By making the results public to anyone in the community they were able to present their side of the argument for those to see. Ms. Oslow said, “At Jefferson, I guess there was some kind of relief at first to our research. But there was a push to keep looking and do more research to see if there were any differences.”

Interestingly enough, the NESCAC itself did not order down that these studies be concluded as the conference instituted very little policy changes in reaction to *Reclaiming*

*the Game*. The one significant recommendation over the last few years that the NESCAC did advise was directed at the admission process of athletes. Ms. Anderson stated that “As part of the review and discussion the conference did adopted a policy across the board which decreased the weight of athletics in the admission process. It made sure that it equaled the weight of any other activity which is considered an admission advantage.” She credited this policy recommendation to the results of *Reclaiming the Game* as well as saying it was an initiative that was brought to the office from the Athletic Directors of the NESCAC through regular conference meetings.

After *Reclaiming the Game* was published, there was a response by the NESCAC Presidents addressing the findings through the NESCAC website. Their official statement was directed towards the main causes for the academic-athletic divide which Bowen and Levin declare lies in the recruitment and admissions process as well as the academic progress of the athletes. The statement also stated that NESCAC schools agreed upon a rule “...to limit the role and influence of athletics in the admissions process.” It continued in saying that “The steps already taken strengthen our commitment to conference principles and the conviction that students participating on intercollegiate teams are to be representative of the student body” (“NESCAC Presidents' Statement”). The Presidents also acknowledged the influence of both *Reclaiming the Game* and *The Game of Life*, stating that their findings were also being addressed. This official statement delivered by the Presidents supports what Ms. Anderson said about the conference’s response in the aftermath of *Reclaiming the Game*.

In addition, there have been institutional responses to these results such as a reduced number of “slots” allotted for athletes in incoming classes. There was not a

specific mandate handed down by NESCAC besides reducing the importance of athletics in the admission process. Therefore, the individual schools made specific policy changes as to how to address this issue. Most of the schools in the NESCAC reduced the specific number of “slots” held for athletes to seventy-one; however a couple other schools reduced this number even further to try to show that the emphasis on athletics was being decreased. This has been greatly reduced, as most schools held over one hundred “slots” for recruited athletes in each incoming class before *Reclaiming the Game* was published. By decreasing this number, the schools believe that it will show that athletics is not such a high priority for these institutions, as it is perceived to be.

A sentiment that the athletically affiliated administration also conveyed about the change in the admission process was the increased involvement that coaches and Athletic Directors began to have over the last few years. Besides solely reducing the number of “slots,” the schools felt a need to bring together these two departments in this difficult process. Mr. Hightower at Colton College said, “That although I never thought our athletes were receiving a great advantage, we started meeting with admission deans to ensure that our athletes were ones who could contribute to our school.” The schools that administered this practice felt that having a more intimate relationship would assure that athletes are representative of the entire student body and are not receiving a sizeable admission advantage.

The athletically affiliated administrators gave several answers towards what can be done to help bridge the gap between academics and athletics. The reaction that was reiterated most often was that everyone in the athletic department needed to incorporate themselves more into the campus community. To go along with that, they also believed

that it is necessary for faculty and students-at-large to integrate themselves into the athletic side of college life as well. Mr. Hightower extending upon this idea when he said,

“I think that faculty can learn from how our coaches coach. In a practice setting, seeing the pedagogy of a coach of how he runs the drills and teaching to the entire group both on the court and through film study could be very beneficial to a professor...and I think even vice versa that our coaches could learn from a good lecturer.”

This thought that everyone can learn from each other is something that makes receiving a liberal arts education at any school in the NESCAC special, and it should be valued when discussing an issue like academics and athletics.

There was also an idea shared by the interviewees that nothing should be done to bridge this gap because athletics is educational in itself. There may be a need to help everyone find this understanding, but make any drastic change would not be beneficial towards bridging this gap. Mr. Isley from Concord College says “I think of all of our athletes as students, not as student-athletes. They are primarily students who happen to be passionate about something, which is athletics. To me there is no divide or anything we need to do to integrate the two groups, because there is no separation.” He believes that athletes should not be judged solely as athletes, just as a violinist should not be classified as only a musician; each is a student who is passionate about one particular activity, which in the end makes for a diverse campus. Although this may be an idealized view, the message shows that there is a need to help eliminate the perception of a divide. By making assertions like this one, people from all arenas may start to see students as students instead of placing them in groups.

Although the authors of *Reclaiming the Game* give quantitative data showing that there is an academic-athletic divide within the NESCAC, the athletically affiliated administrators that I interviewed did not believe there was such a divide at their school. They believed that the perception of such a divide is something that needs to be addressed and looked at more in depth. If this divide is fueled only through perceptions, what steps can be taken to eliminate such views? My interviewees believed that athletes and those within the athletic department must first begin to associate themselves throughout the campus. In addition, those faculty and students at large who do not connect with athletics must view the athletic facilities and everything that occurs within them as educational rather than a hindrance to the academic mission of the college. Ms. Oslow clearly stated this idea as she said, “Because in the end we’re all here doing the same kind of work, our disciplines are different but we all do them at the same high level. We want to help open avenues so everyone sees that teaching is teaching, whether in a classroom or on a court, we’re all pushing the students to strive for their best in all arenas.” The interviewees shared in this belief that when everyone across the community sees the educational value of athletics, the perception of an academic-athletic divide, and ultimately in the end the divide itself, can be eliminated.



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