

September, 2015

To the NESCAC Presidents:

Summary: NESCAC should make three changes to athletics. First, eliminate football. Second, disallow participation by athletes older than 22 (except, in individual cases, by unanimous consent). Third, provide transparency about team academic performance in both high school and college.

First, football is too dangerous.

The National Football League, which for years disputed evidence that its players had a high rate of severe brain damage, has stated in federal court documents that it expects nearly a third of retired players to develop long-term cognitive problems and that the conditions are likely to emerge at “notably younger ages” than in the general population.¹

NESCAC football may be less dangerous than playing in the NFL, but there is every reason to believe that it is more dangerous, by an order of magnitude, than every other NESCAC sport. More importantly, the defenses for football are weak:

- “No student is forced to play football. To the extent doing so is dangerous, it is a student’s choice, just like participation in other risky activities like rock climbing.” The vast majority of starting players on most (all?) NESCAC football teams would not have been admitted to their school if they did not agree to play football. They don’t really have any “choice,” at least if they are being honest with the coach who is recruiting them. If they tell the coach that, while they would love to go to school X, they don’t plan on playing football, the coach won’t put them on his list and they won’t be accepted.
- “Ending football would be too unpopular among the alumni and/or major donors.” Connecticut College has no football program, and yet does as well as the average NESCAC school in terms of alumni giving and loyalty. Swarthmore ended football 15 years ago and, after a short-lived controversy, has raised as much money as almost any liberal arts college.
- “Football may be dangerous for students but it is not dangerous for the College.” The first football lawsuit against a NESCAC school is not far away. If the NFL was willing to pay millions to injured players, even those who had only been in the league for a season or two, why wouldn’t the same reasoning apply to four-year NESCAC players? Do you want to be deposed by a plaintiff’s attorney about what you knew about the risks of football? Do your trustees? Organizations with hundreds of millions of dollars in assets

¹ “Brain Trauma to Affect One in Three Players, N.F.L. Agrees” *New York Times*, September 12, 2014.

attract lawsuits. The more years you allow football to continue, the greater the potential liability.

Second, the average age of student athletes in NESCAC continues to increase, further deepening the athlete/non-athlete divide at most schools. This is especially true for starters in high profile sports. Indeed, it is hard to find a NESCAC men's hockey team in which several of the best players are not two years older than their classmates after spending several years in junior hockey. Although many students use the PG (post-graduate) year option to better prepare for the rigors of NESCAC academics, others (and the coaches who recruit them) use it as a red shirt year, a chance to become a better athlete. Since athletic ability peaks in your late 20s, this aging-of-athletes process will only continue. This isn't too large a problem now, which makes it all the easier to end. Exceptions, by unanimous consent of the NESCAC presidents could be made in individual cases, like the military veteran who starts college at 21 and was not recruited specifically for his athletic talent. Once coaches know that they can't play outstanding athletes who are too old, they will find plenty of 18-year-olds to recruit.

Third, NESCAC schools should measure and make public the academic accomplishments of their student athletes, both in high school (AP/SAT scores) and in college (GPA, majors).

Suggestions:

- In the first (trial) year, allow each school to present the information in whatever way it prefers. (Smart presidents will simply delegate the task to their athletic directors and institutional researchers.) Since no (?) athletic conference has done this before, it is not clear what the best approach might be.
- Any statistic should be presented in three different ways: for the entire student body, for the team as a whole and for the team weighted by playing time. (The last measure discourages coaches from stacking teams with academically accomplished benchwarmers.) FERPA prevents schools from releasing data about an individual student, but there is no law against making aggregate data available.
- Include data from both high school and college. We want to demonstrate both the affect of athletics on admissions and, even more importantly, how athletes perform in college.

There are several benefits to greater transparency about the academic performance of NESCAC athletes. First, it would publicly demonstrate a fact that many non-athletes doubt: On the whole, athletes are similar in their academic qualifications and accomplishments to non-athletes. Second, it would encourage coaches to make academics a bigger focus in both their recruiting and their mentorship. If you (partially) measure coaches by the academic performance of their teams, you will get better academic performance. Third, it will prevent coaches/schools from complaining, inaccurately, about the behavior of their peers. Right now, coach X loves to claim that school Y unfairly lowers standards for its recruits. Who knows? With transparency, we can observe institutional behavior easily.