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Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values

William G. Bowen and Sarah A. Levin: (Princeton University Press, 2003 \$27.95).

Reviewed by Chris Abrams M.Ed.

Despite recent attempts by the NCAA, NAIA, and other institutional, regional and national governing bodies, the academic gap between athletes and non-athletes on college campuses continues to widen. Repeatedly documented is the sad academic state of intercollegiate athletics. However, until recently the assumption, although untested, has been that the Ivy League schools or “Ivies” and NCAA Division III (D-III) schools were above all the academic and behavioral problems in their NCAA Division I, II and NAIA counterparts. The conventional wisdom being that the Ivies and D-III schools participate in a purer version of athletics where an attitude that exemplifies participation over entertainment is the cornerstone. In their book *Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values*, a follow up to their book *The Game of Life*, William G. Bowen and Sarah A. Levin examine how many of the problems of Division I and II collegiate athletics have trickled down to the Ivies and D-III schools.

In beginning their discussion, Bowen and Levin point out their strong affinity for collegiate sports. As they state right from the beginning, “We cannot imagine American college life without intercollegiate teams, playing fields, and vigorous intramural as well as recreational sports programs” (p. 1). However, Bowen and Levin’s major concern is what they observe as the widely publicized excesses and more subtle issues of balance and emphasis that undermine the beneficial impact of athletics. In order to defend their claim of excesses and balance issues, Bowen and Levin turn their attentions away from the typical powerhouses of NCAA Division I athletics and focus their attention on the Ivies and other D-III schools, following the institutional process from recruiting to graduation. Two basic sections divide their text. The first examines the state of athletics in the Ivies and D-III schools. The second is a discussion of how these schools should attempt to resolve their current state.

Why study athletics in the Ivies and D-III schools? The authors have two major reasons for their study of these particular institutions the first is volume. A student can attend a NCAA Division I institution and never cross paths with an athlete. However, within the D-III institutions studied, 43 percent of the male students and 32 percent of the female students were athletes. Recruited athletes made up 24 percent of male students and 17 percent of female students. What do these percentages mean? Bowen and Levin argue that athletes at an NCAA Division I institution have a lesser chance of effecting the overall educational climate of a campus. However, at the small liberal arts college as at most schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities CCCU, athletes can significantly shape the academic quality of a campus population.

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The second reason Bowen and Levin address the perceived woes of athletics in the Ivies and D-III institutions are their strong conviction that things can change. The time for change in NCAA Division I athletics may have passed, but such is not so for the Ivies and D-III schools. So with the use of a new methodology not able to be used at Division I schools the authors begin to analyze the Ivies and D-III schools.

In order to study these schools, Bowen and Levin are able to incorporate a new methodological innovation they were unable to use in their first book *The Game of Life*. This innovation is the ability to distinguish recruited athletes (those who were on the coaches' lists presented to admissions deans) from all other athletes, who the authors define as "walk-ons." This allows Bowen and Levin to deal directly with the divide between the recruited athletes and the rest of the student population, including the difference between the recruited athlete and the non-recruited athlete.

Beginning with the admissions process, Bowen and Levin uncover two interesting revelations. Admission is granted at a four times greater rate for the recruited athlete, at the Ivies, than a similar applicant not on a coach's list. Second, the average SAT score of a male football, basketball, and ice hockey athlete is between 119 and 165 points below their non-athlete peers at both the Ivies and D-III schools. In examining these points, Bowen and Levin indicate that the present "divide" is unacceptable from the standpoint of educational values.

In their study of the academic performance of recruited athletes in these institutions, Bowen and Levin discover about three-quarters of recruited male athletes in football, basketball, and ice hockey and nearly two-thirds of recruited male athletes in soccer, track and swimming are in the bottom third of their class. In addition, although many athletes begin their career at an academic disadvantage to their non-athlete counterparts, athletes continuously under-perform based in relationship to the academic credentials they bring to college.

Many supporters of the current athletic climate point out that athletes spend a great deal of time outside the classroom, a phenomenon which makes academic achievement difficult. However, Bowen and Levin found that other student groups who spend a great deal of time outside the classroom working on a skill, such as musicians, do not demonstrate the same rate of underperformance. In fact, groups such as musicians tend to outperform their classmates.

Although Bowen and Levin spend a great deal of time defending their belief, the theme of their discussion is reform. Many authors including Bowen and Levin have documented the troubled state of intercollegiate athletics. However, Bowen and Levin's passion for athletics compels them to not only advocate for change, but suggest a realistic sense of change.

The nature of higher education compels many within the academy to believe that problems may have solutions, but most of these solutions involve too much work, are too complicated, or will never gain enough support. Although the last problem may be the case with athletics, Bowen and Levin offer easy solutions that allow athletic and educational missions to walk hand in hand. First, the authors believe schools should admit students based on their academic ability and should encourage athletic participation within their qualified pool of students. "Recruiting large numbers of athletes not only claims places in the entering class; it also greatly diminishes opportunities for other athletically interested (and talented) students to play on intercollegiate teams" (247).

Second, coaches should share the goals of the institution. Teaching in and out of the classroom must be the goal of the intercollegiate coaches. Coaches must be evaluated on their ability to teach and graduate athletes, instead of by their win-loss record.

Third, the time commitment required to participate in varsity athletics must be reduced. Bowen and Levin advocate for the shortening of practice and playing time, eliminating class and exam conflicts, and requiring “off seasons” that actually involve a pause in athletic endeavors.

Fourth, no athletic scholarships should mean no athletic scholarships. The games that D-III and the Ivies play to give athletes money should be strictly monitored and stopped. Students should be aided monetarily based on their abilities to aid the educational mission of an institution or based on need, not on their ability to put a ball in a basket. The text also discusses the potential need for institutions to cut football programs and the need for reform within governing bodies such as the NCAA and conference organizations.

Although Bowen and Levin’s text does not discuss NAIA schools or any particular school in the CCCU, their book should at least concern those who work on small Christian liberal-arts campuses. If the elite academic schools in this country have these problems to such an alarming degree, chances are many small Christian campuses are having a similar dilemma. The benefit of their discussion is that the college or university is given not only the problem, but also the solution. Student Affairs professionals have a stake in delivering education with integrity. Student Affairs professional have the task of “out-of-classroom education,” which often includes athletics.

One finds nothing new in Bowen and Levin’s commentary just proof of what many have suspected. Their ability to get at information, such as the lists coaches provide admissions officers, is quite a feat. The question no longer is, “Is there a problem?” The question is, “How big and widespread is the problem?” In addition, their solutions are so straightforward any institution can realistically make real, positive change. I applaud Bowen and Levin for giving us all a real look at the dichotomy athletics has created in education. The goal for the small-liberal arts college is to return athletics to its original purpose. The director of athletics and physical education at Bryn Mawr, Amy Campbell states it best when she says “College athletics is a prized endeavor and one that enriches the experience of college students. The question should not be at what price athletics but rather how to structure athletic programs that both serve both the student athletic interest and the great goals of liberal-arts institutions” (p1-2).