

## 2009 Report by the Athletics Committee: Varsity Athletes and Academics

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In the Spring of 2002, an ad-hoc committee chaired by Michael MacDonald reported on its review of the role that varsity athletics played at Williams College. Shortly thereafter, Bowen and Levin published “Reclaiming the Game”, a book that reviewed varsity athletics in three conferences (Ivy League, NESCAC, and UAA) whose institutions place a high value on academics. Both the book and the MacDonald report concluded that varsity athletics (within NESCAC and at Williams) posed problems for some aspects of the academic mission of colleges such as Williams. Specifically, they found that a) varsity athletes, and particularly male high-profile varsity athletes, under-performed academically; b) varsity athletes tended to cluster in certain majors and c) some faculty members felt that lack of intellectual engagement of varsity athletes posed problems for their classes. The purpose of this report is to re-examine some of these findings, seven years later<sup>1</sup>.

We find that the gap in academic performance, as judged by grade point average, has narrowed substantially overall and has essentially disappeared for female athletes and for male athletes in low-profile sports. The gap for male athletes in high-profile varsity sports (which we defined as football, ice hockey, basketball, and baseball; other studies include different sports, such as wrestling and lacrosse) appears to be narrowing, but persists even after we adjust for 1) academic qualifications prior to enrolling at Williams College, 2) socio-economic status, and 3) the individual’s year (e.g. sophomore, senior). Thus academic under-performance by male varsity athletes in high-profile sports continues, and cannot be attributed to academic credentials prior to Williams or to socioeconomic status.

The narrowing of the overall academic performance gap since 2002 could be due to any of a number of factors (perhaps including changes in team culture during the past decade) but one likely factor is the change in admissions standards for athletic “tips”. The minimum qualifications required for admission to Williams have been raised during the intervening years, and are continuing to rise. Thus varsity athletes’ academic preparation for Williams College is increasingly similar to that of the rest of the student body. Our data indicate that academic under-performance by male varsity athletes playing high-profile sports can largely be attributed to those who are less well-prepared academically for Williams, and thus it is our sense that the “raising of the floor” for admissions tips may have been an important factor in reducing overall difference in the GPAs of varsity athletes and non-athletes.

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<sup>1</sup>The Athletics Committee serves as Williams College’s “Institutional Athletics Committee” in NCAA parlance, and its chair is the “Faculty Athletics Representative”, or FAR. Among the responsibilities of the FAR are “monitoring the academic performance of student athletes” and “making regular reports to the faculty senate on athletics” (<http://www.farawebsite.org/files/FARAHandbook.htm>).

The difference in distribution of varsity athletes' majors and the majors chosen by non-athletes continues; in particular, male athletes on high-profile teams predominantly choose majors in Division II. While we in no way wish to suggest that any group of athletes be urged or pressured to make a choice of major other than the one they wish to study, we do note that the disproportionate numbers of male varsity athletes on high-profile teams within certain majors could, because that group under-performs academically, potentially reinforce stereotypes and/or affect the academic experience of other students and faculty members within those majors.

All groups of varsity athletes are less likely than their peers to enroll in tutorials or write honors theses. Although this gap also appears to be narrower than that reported by the MacDonald committee, it remains substantial and significant. Our interpretation of this difference is complicated by the concentration of varsity athletes within some majors, as it is possible that those majors do not offer as many opportunities for students to take tutorials and write theses. As was the case for GPA, the difference between varsity athletes and non-athletes in their enrollments in tutorials and completion of honors theses is more pronounced for male athletes on high-profile teams; however, this gap exists for other groups of athletes as well.

Our results do not explain why one group of athletes under-performs academically, or why all groups of varsity athletes are less likely to enroll in tutorials or complete honors theses. Some possibilities that have been raised in the literature and in our discussions are 1) "stigma" - that some faculty members have a negative view of athletes and that this could affect grades and admission to courses; 2) that athletes experience stereotype threat; 3) that recruited varsity athletes are primarily committed to their sport and coach and do not place as high a priority on academics as do other students; 4) that some teams' culture promotes a disengagement from academics; and 5) that investing time and energy in athletics reduces time spent on other activities. We do not know which of these explanations, or which combination of these explanations, might apply to varsity athletes at Williams College. We did investigate the "time and energy" hypothesis indirectly by asking whether JAs (a group of students with a substantial time commitment to an extracurricular activity that spans the entire year) demonstrate any under-performance in terms of GPA and low rates of enrollment in tutorials. After correcting for academic preparation, sex, and socioeconomic status, the grades of JAs were statistically indistinguishable from those of other juniors, although they enrolled in tutorials at a slightly lower rate than did their peers. Which of the other explanations might help to explain academic under-performance by male varsity athletes in high-profile sports at Williams College is not clear<sup>2</sup>. It is our view that this question merits further study, and we recommend that the college take advantage of a future COFHE questionnaire to ask students about the rationale for their choices and priorities with respect to participating in tutorials and writing theses.

In summary, our primary finding is positive and encouraging: the academic performance gap between varsity athletes and other students has narrowed overall and has disappeared for female varsity athletes and for male varsity athletes in low-profile sports. On the other hand, male athletes on high-profile varsity teams continue, as a group, to under-perform academically even after their

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<sup>2</sup> A recent study using Swarthmore varsity athletes as subjects demonstrated an effect of stereotype threat; the MacDonald report raised concerns about "athletic culture" discouraging academic engagement; and Bowen and Levin, in "Reclaiming the Game", favored the explanation that recruited athletes' first priority is athletics. However, we have no evidence to support or refute any of these hypotheses.

academic preparation and socioeconomic status has been taken into account, and all varsity athletes are less likely than their peers to enroll in tutorials and undertake honors theses. Because our review of academic performance has been based on studies of groups and averages, we wish to note that within any group there will always be those who perform well above (or below) the average - there are undoubtedly many male varsity athletes in high-profile sports who are fully engaged in the academic life of the college. Although the gaps we have noted remain, they are narrowing, and it is our sense that a combination of continuing trends in admissions standards and leadership by athletic and academic faculty and student athletes will contribute to further narrowing of academic differences between varsity athletes and other students.

We conclude our report with the following recommendations:

- 1) That Williams College use the next available opportunity to add questions about students' reasons for taking tutorials and writing honors theses to an instrument such as the COFHE survey. Doing so could provide important information about why varsity athletes are less likely to take advantage of these academic opportunities.
- 2) That head coaches be provided, once each year, with information about their teams' academic performance (relative to predicted performance after taking academic preparation, class year, and socioeconomic status into account), as well as information about enrollment in tutorials and undertaking honors theses. We further strongly recommend that this information not be made generally available; it is intended solely to provide athletic faculty with a basis for advising the athletes they coach.
- 3) That athletic faculty should be more visibly included in the academic life and governance of the college. Much of the college's committee business and many of its intellectually-oriented events are scheduled between 4:00 PM and 6:00 PM, precluding participation by athletic faculty who are in their coaching seasons. Both a) scheduling more committee meetings away from those hours and b) developing a seminar series or lunch series that focuses upon topics of interest to both academic and athletic faculty (muscle physiology, pedagogy, some other examples, etc.) would be desirable.
- 4) That first-year varsity athletes who participate in Men's Soccer, Women's Soccer, Volleyball, Field Hockey and Football be better integrated into the student body early in their first semester. Scheduling does not allow many of these students the option of choosing any Ephventures program that they would like; instead varsity athletes tend to choose the Ephventure option that does not conflict with their athletic schedule, and thus many first-year varsity athletes engage in a parallel but separate set of activities compared to their non-athlete peers during this component of First Days. Ideally, the scheduling of first-year activities and fall athletic practices could be better coordinated so that first-year students do not have to choose between practices and Ephventures activities.

- 5) That a session on issues specific to varsity athletes be included as a component of JA training (in the context of diversity).
- 6) Since the MacDonald report was presented, the academic standards for admission of athletic “tips” within NESAC and at Williams have been raised. These changes are likely to be largely responsible for the narrowing of the academic performance gap between varsity athletes and non-athletes. It is our understanding that the admissions standards for “tips” are continuing to rise, and the recruited athletes in future entering classes are likely to be more similar, in their academic credentials, to their non-athlete peers. Although we note that this may affect the success of Williams College teams, we unanimously support the continuation of this trend.
- 7) In order to improve communication about potential conflicts between exams and athletic commitments, we recommend that the web page that lists athletic events that could conflict with academic events be coordinated with the web page the Registrar’s office maintains listing the calendar of evening exams. It would also be desirable to list the academic faculty associates for those varsity teams that have them.
- 8) The 2009-2010 Athletics Committee should revisit two additional questions raised by the MacDonald report: a) Whether “clumping” of varsity athletes’ course choices exists, and if so, whether this presents a problem; b) Whether varsity athletes generate more disciplinary problems than do non-athletes.
- 9) Finally, we recommend that studies of academic performance by athletes continue to be carried out periodically by the Athletics Committee. We recommend that the interval between such studies be five years. Reports of differences in academic performance tend to contribute to a sense of stigma and to stereotype threat among varsity athletes, but failure to report on athletes’ academic performance studies is equally undesirable; a 5-year interval is a reasonable compromise.

*Note: The statistical analyses used in preparing this report are summarized in an appendix that is not part of the report, but will be placed on file in the Dean of Faculty’s office.*