

NESCAC Postseason Policy

Balancing Academic Excellence and Athletic Competition

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Abstract

The New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC) was established in 1971. It was founded on the principles of balancing the harmony between academics and athletics. Its main mission was to prevent toxic athletic arms races and safeguard the rigorous academic standards of the member schools. For two decades, the NESCAC members opted not to compete in any NCAA team postseason competition due to their concern about imposing excessive pressure and tensions among students, coaches, admission officers, faculties, administrators, and many other stakeholders. Despite the potential negative impacts the postseason competition would bring to NESCAC schools, due to internal pressure from students and coaches as well as external pressure from competitive peer institutions, the NESCAC presidents voted to lift the postseason ban in 1993. This paper explores the intricate interplay among multiple stakeholders as higher education undergoes changes.

Introduction

New England Small College Athletic Conference, also known as NESCAC, comprises eleven liberal arts colleges in Northeast America. The conference first permitted NCAA team championship participation as a three-year experiment in 1993. As of April 1, 2024, NESCAC has amassed 121 Division-III national titles, ranking second highest in the nation, surpassing the third place by an additional 49 titles (National Championships 2024). This is an impressive result for a conference where academics always come first, despite lifting the postseason competition ban just thirty years ago. The transition from no-postseason to postseason took a long time and a

lot of negotiations. This raises questions about why a conference with successful teams would prefer to abstain from NCAA national competition for the first twenty-two years and what factors facilitated the transition to the postseason era. Answering those questions would help researchers understand the history and development of NESCAC.

Literature Review

Higher education is more than a place where students go after high school. It is at the intersection that connects high school students, professors, administrators, social status, alumni, and many other stakeholders, and thereby it is “a hub, connecting multiple social processes that often are regarded as distinct” (Stevens 2008:128). To operate a higher education institution, the public schools have federal and state funding, and the private institutions have donations from their generous alumni. With more money and donations, the colleges would be able to build more facilities, hire more well-known professors, and attract more high-achieving students. These factors will lead to an increase in admission selectivity and name recognition.

The more prestigious the colleges become, the more money they would receive especially from their alumni because wealthy philanthropists love to “serve on the board of the alma mater as it gains prestige from increasingly selective admissions”(Eaton 2022:34). After all, even when a donor has familiarity with an organization, its prestige will still be a factor in eliciting largest contributions (Ostrower 1995:41). For wealthy people, donating to prestigious universities is an investment and exchange that buys them a seat and social status at the board of prestigious institutions and makes connections with other wealthy people on the board.

As a result, this would lead to a positive cycle in that wealthy and well-known schools such as the Ivy League universities accumulate more and more wealth and name recognition while low-ranking and endowment schools may face the possibility of shutting down.

However, attracting philanthropists to donate is the first step. The most challenging aspect for the administration of the institutions is to keep the donors to donate continuously. To attract more applicants and improve the prestigiousness of the schools, it would be unavoidable to modify the current admission, academic, and administrative policy. However, it is far more complicated to make changes in higher education because there are so many stakeholders. It is not just the donors but also the students, professors, and alumni.

Trying to make some changes to the current status of higher education, is like an iceberg that “most of the danger lies below the surface” (Buller 2014:5). While the iceberg above the water consists of the cost, time, and quality of the change, the iceberg below the surface is far more complicated, and to manage the process smoothly, it is necessary to “understand the political environment and power dynamics of the organization in which they work” (Buller 2014:7). If the administration does not handle it well, it may lead to serious, irretrievable consequences. As a result, the change in higher education would take a considerable amount of time and analysis before putting into action.

Results

In 1971, due to the increasing competitiveness in college athletics, the Presidents of eleven small liberal arts colleges believed that these athletics arm race phenomena “worked against small liberal arts colleges, and some form of athletic organization between these schools would provide a necessary” (Vélez 1997:4), so the presidents of those colleges came together and established the New England Small College Athletic Conference to ensure that

Intercollegiate athletics is to be kept in harmony with the essential education purposes of the institution, competing players are to be representative of the student body, and the academic authority in each college is to control intercollegiate athletic policy.
(Wittelman, 1971).

All of the NESCAC member schools shared two common characteristics: small size and similarly highly selective admission profiles, along with rigorous academic standards. The conference had restricted regulations on the number of practices, the length of the season, foreign travels, budget spending, recruitment, and especially postseason competition. Those restrictions were to prevent an athletics arms race and safeguard the unshakable priority of academics in those institutions.

This explains why NESCAC chose ‘Conference’ instead of ‘League’ in its name because “presidents feared that a league would imply championships, increasing pressure to win” (A Reflection 1995:2). As a result, the underlying philosophy of NESCAC was to foster a balanced relationship between academics and athletics as well as protect the member schools from excessive athletic rivalry.

However, since the founding of NESCAC, the conversation and the discussion of allowing teams to join the postseason competition were always brought up during presidents' meetings, but the majority of the presidents would always “[reaffirm] their commitment to the prohibition of team participation to allay growing competitive pressure on teams” (Vélez 1997:14). The presidents argued that allowing NCAA participation would undermine NESCAC’s founding principle by creating a lot of pressure on colleges including the admissions office, coaches, student-athletes, and many other stakeholders.

First of all, participating in postseason competitions would result in more class time loss and exam absences for students. President Sawyer of Williams College emphasized this concern and stated that such circumstances could "put more pressure on students and on the total system than current conditions will stand, and can generate the kind of faculty or student alienation from the intercollegiate athletic program that could threaten the whole" (N.E.S.C.A.C. PHILOSOPHY

1971). President Sawyer's concern underscored the delicate balance between academics and athletics within NESCAC institutions. Due to time conflicts between NESCAC school schedules and NCAA postseason competitions, student-athletes would have a higher chance of missing classes and exams. Additionally, his statement pointed out that maintaining this balance between academics and athletics is crucial for receiving continued support from faculty members who are essential stakeholders in higher education and collegiate athletics.

Indeed, in 1996, three years after the lift of the postseason ban, President Payne of Williams College expressed frustration to other NESCAC presidents, stating, "We suddenly had many applications for waivers for full teams right through the heart of examinations. I challenged the Presidents on this, indicating we were essentially destroying the rule by continuous exemption" (Vélez 1997:35). As the primary decision-makers at Williams College, both President Sawyer and President Payne were central figures in gathering substantial and important feedback. They both gauged the negative impact of postseason competitions on the school, especially its erosion on NESCAC's commitment to protect and centralize academic priorities. Their concerns resonated among NESCAC presidents and reaffirmed their decision to maintain the prohibition on postseason participation. Furthermore, since there is a fixed annual running budget, increasing the athletic budget means spending less budget on academics including research, paychecks, and facilities, which runs counter to the principle "academic comes first". This would lead to more tension between the administrators and the faculty members at the college.

In addition, the postseason policy would add more pressure on the admission office and administrator. NESCAC schools were small colleges, and most of the members only had five hundred new incoming students each year. If the goal of the admission office was to build a few

teams that would qualify for nationals, this would lead to accepting students with less qualified academic backgrounds, which would be hypocritical for a NESCAC school that was proud of its rigorous academics.

When the postseason was allowed, schools such as Trinity College “allotted severity-one spots to athletics prospects who would otherwise not be able to gain admission”(Covell 2022:164). What’s more, NESCAC has a strict scholarship policy that “financial aid to students shall be determined solely on the basis of need as computed by the College Scholarship Service and controlled by the Financial Aid Officer” (Athletic Conference Agreement 1970:5). This would direct more pressure on the admission office because not only would they have to admit less qualified applicants, but also provide financial aid to those recruited athletes. For NESCAC schools, a large amount of financial aid was donated by alumni because the alumni endorsed the mission and the philosophy of the college, and providing admission and financial aid to recruiting athletes while rejecting qualified applicants would deteriorate the relationship between the school and generous alumni.

The policy also posed more pressure on student-athletes and coaches that would eventually disrupt their longstanding strong relationships. The NESCAC schools have always been proud of their reputation for great relationships between coaches and student-athletes. In an editorial "Ivy League Should Follow Example Set by NESCAC," Woody Anderson of the Hartford Courant described NESCAC in 1980 as:

They don't waste time filling their teams with top athletes but rather work with what walks in the front door. They don't have to worry about getting so and so past the admissions department. They are not blinded by a "must win" philosophy.
(NESCAC in the Media)

However, this sustainable and healthy connection deteriorated once the door opened for athletes to pursue national championships. The athletic program lost its purity—it shifted focus from

enabling athletes to continue playing the sports they loved to be competitive and pursue victory. The nature of competition would force coaches to spend more time recruiting athletes instead of focusing on the personal and athletic growth of the current players. The players would have higher pressure to perform well in the tournament even at the beginning of the regular season because “losing early games defeats morale for the rest of the season and makes the remaining NESCAC games all the more stressful” (Covell 2022:155). This violated the role and mission of athletics in NESCAC schools to promote student’s physical and mental health because it certainly posed more stress and anxiety to students.

Moreover, more attention on the winning record due to the postseason policy would also increase the conflicts among coaches, athletes, and alumni. Several years after the ban was lifted, this concern indeed became a reality, as the athletic director of Amherst College Peter Gooding complained that he “grew tired of meeting with parents and athletes who wanted a coach fired because the team didn’t make the NCAAs” (Covell 2022:158). This certainly broke the founding principle of NESCAC as it crossed the boundaries since it would trigger an athletics arms race among all of the NESCAC schools.

Nonetheless, despite all of the disadvantages and conflicts that might occur, the pressure of having a postseason was much stronger both internally and externally.

The most important argument for pro-postseason was for consistency and equity. Even though NESCAC prohibited the teams from attending national championships, the individual qualifiers would still be allowed to compete if obtaining the waiver from NESCAC. This was unfair to team sports such as lacrosse, hockey, and soccer. Meanwhile, it also reduced the number of qualifiers for teams such as cross country and track that could attend national if allowing team competition. The major push to change came from the coaches. In an angry letter

addressing the unfair postseason policy from Bowdoin Cross Country Coach Peter Slovenski to Bowdoin President Edwards in 1992:

I do not understand how a sweeping rule capping off excellence in athletics fits into the governance of a group of colleges. Setting rules for equality of practice sessions, competitions, scholarships, academic obligations, and recruiting makes perfect sense. When a team follows these rules, and excels, it does not make any sense to limit the height of their success... How do I get this rule changed without complaining? I am so frustrated about trying to change this rule through channels that I am ready to quit over it. I cannot find the channel. The students cannot find the channels. Do the channels exist, and will they seriously and thoughtfully consider student options? (Slovenski 1992)

Witnessing their athletes not obtaining deserving awards frustrated the coaches because they could not find a way or an alternative to help their athletes reach the stage they deserved.

Similarly, student-athletes were dissatisfied and angered by its effects. A student-athlete at Hamilton College complained, "We are deluding ourselves if we think we will be able to attract these same quality individuals by creating our own organization outside the parameters of mainstream competition" (Response from student athlete). For dedicated athletes, the unreasonable policy of the conference became the sole barrier preventing them from competing at a higher level. The student-athletes felt that they were forced to be in the bubble and isolated from athletes of institutions outside NESCAC, and they believed such isolation would hinder their personal growth. Those disappointments from the students would lead NESCAC to lose prospective student-athletes to its competitor schools such as MIT, a place that provides both excellent academic and athletics programs. The pressure of losing quality student-athletes along with the coaches' threat to resign add a certain amount of pressure to the administrators of NESCAC.

What's more, other than losing great student-athletes to other schools, not competing in the NCAA would also lose non-student athletes to schools in other conferences because competing at the national level would increase the visibility of NESCAC. One great example

was the squash program at Trinity College. Due to its unsafe geographic location and small endowment, Trinity suffered from a low yield rate. Trinity President Dobelle “had identified squash as a sport in which his school could compete against the Ivies and potentially share and steal some of the Ivies Ideal brand equity”(Covell 2022:162) because most of the squash programs were supported by the Ivy League schools. The president hired coach Assaiante to heavily recruit from overseas and built a successful team that captivated a lot of national attention. In an article from the New York Times Magazine in 2011, the title was “Squashing the Ivies” (Wachter 2011) telling the story of the Trinity squash team beating the IVY league schools and dominating the national titles for twelve years. Being exposed to the spotlight of media enabled NESCAC schools to have broader audiences outside New England and New York areas, and thereby the philosophy of NESCAC would reach more potential applicants. With a larger pool of candidates, NESCAC schools would have more excellent and diverse student bodies to pick from.

The third force that incentivized the transition was to promote its national image. For example, Title IX was an anti-discriminatory federal regulation that prohibits any type of gender-based discrimination in educational settings. In the college sports context, this implied that there should not be any unequal opportunities based on gender including funding and schedules. Joining the NCAA would be a great path to implement actions that ensure gender equality because “NCAA Division III provided ample resources for both women’s and men’s competitions at a time when college funding for athletics was stretched to the limit in attempts to satisfy Title IX” (Vélez 1997:15). Beyond obtaining more resources from NCAA to facilitate the growth of the women teams. NESCAC schools received even more name recognition when

their women's teams became successful in the national competition because when Title IX was first introduced, women athletes were treated unfairly at other universities:

Women participating in intercollegiate athletics believe they are treated and perceived as second class citizens. Some women athletes are stereotyped in regard to their assumed sexual preference, and are considered to be different by their peers. Indeed, women may choose not to participate in athletics because of their anxiety of being categorized.
(Overview: Gender Equity)

The success of the women's teams at the national level is an indicator of the successful implementation of Title IX at NESCAC schools. This proved that NESCAC women's teams were able to receive funding, equipment, practice time, and competing opportunities. This was an effective way to demonstrate the values of NESCAC and build a great national reputation. This tied back to the prior argument that the more national exposure of the conference value, the more name recognition and potential appreciation the NESCAC schools would receive, and thereby the school could have a larger pool to hand pick the most high-achieving students.

The issue of equity, the desire for more national visibility, and the implementation of Title IX, the big environment that perspective students looked for larger stage to compete as well as “conditions surround post-season play in Division III have changed markedly in the past twenty years” (Edwards, Oakley, & Payne 1992) eventually drove the NESCAC schools to play in the postseason

Discussion

The transition from a no postseason conference to the time when the ban was lifted took a lot of time, discussion, and negotiations among different parties. This process of change was like the iceberg. The part we could see was the debates among the presidents and students about the pros and cons of having a postseason. However, below the sea level, there were so many

stakeholders that were involved that were not obvious. The jobs of the presidents were not just simply to please the students, coaches, and administrators of each member school. They had to understand the intertwined situation at that moment because the school is a hub that channels so many parties—government, alumni, and generous donors.

The transition to the postseason for NESCAC schools was a significant deal. This change might break the founding principle of NESCAC that ensured the priority of academics and avoided athletics arms race, which would lead to admitting academically unqualified students and potentially harming the reputation of the schools and discourage philanthropist from donating to the schools because they would not receive the exchange of the social status. Current donors might withdraw support if they felt their contributions were being allocated to academically unqualified athletes

Nonetheless, based on the fact that the presidents decided to lift the postseason ban in 1993, it was clear that the presidents believed the benefits outweighed the disadvantages. In other words, allowing a postseason conference had a higher chance of increasing name recognition and prestige for NESCAC schools. Reality also confirmed that. The success and the domination of the NESCAC schools received so much more exposure in the country. The value of the conference went beyond New England and New York and reached more potential applicants, which brought down the admission rate and increased the selectivity for all schools in the conference. The name recognition and high selectivity drove wealthy people to donate, and the money was put to good use to improve the facilities, hire faculties, and provide generous financial aid to attract high-achieving students from all socio-economic backgrounds. This is the reason underlying the transition to the postseason, and the positive cycle caused by the transition eventually led to the highly selective, wealthy NESCAC schools we know nowadays.

Conclusion

This research was mostly based on the report *The New England Small College Athletic Conference, 1971–1997: A Retrospective* written by Karin Vélez on August 9, 1997, and the book *The New England Small College Athletic Conference: A History* written by Daniel Covell in 2022 along with archival documents from report of Bowdoin Presidents Howell and Edwards from 1964 to 1995, and historical NESCAC documents. The sources used for this research were well-represented; however, they were all official documents such as letters between presidents. Many important ones may be missing due to inappropriate storage or intentional cleaning, which might lead to missing some important information about the factors that push the final transition. Beyond the official documents, in the future, it would be important to investigate the opinions of the students from student-run newspapers. Furthermore, comparative studies with the histories of other conferences such as the IVY League and Claremont Colleges could also provide valuable insights into the broader context of collegiate athletics and its transitions.

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