

## High Profile Football Players' Reading at a Research University: ACT Scores, Interview Responses, and Personal Preferences

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**Abstract:** This qualitative case study examines the reading acumen of a cohort of twenty-six senior football players at a Midwestern public research university. Data related to three indices—ACT scores, interview responses, and personal preferences—were collected as part of a larger IRB-approved study aimed at determining the factors that led to the entire cohort graduating within their NCAA eligibility period. In general, the players' interview responses and their preferences for recreational reading reveal more about their reading habits than do the ACT data. This feedback, coupled with objective ACT scores, portrays a rich, complex picture of scholarship athletes' literate lives, a picture that defies easy explanation. Overall, the study suggests that college reading and writing instructors may want to reconsider the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes often held about high profile athletes.<sup>[1]</sup>

Composition scholars Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue (2012) recently declared that "[f]or those interested in reading, this is an exciting time" (p. 199). Observing that the subject of reading is relevant again, they nonetheless conclude that English Studies' revival of interest in reading after two decades of relative inattention has it emerging as not much more than "an old beast slouching toward a not yet visible destination" (p. 200). Salvatori and Donahue pose a lengthy list of theoretical, programmatic, and institutional questions they believe need to be addressed to move the conversation forward. For her part, Alice Horning has been prodding composition scholars to pay attention to reading for some time, with this special issue of *ATD* a prime outcome. In her introduction to this issue, Horning (2013) describes what she calls the "don't, won't, can't" problem of today's college students: they don't read in ways that faculty expect; they won't read unless faculty coerce them; and most important, they can't read texts with the critical reading skills educators expect.

This essay is a case study of one cohort of high profile football players' reading, athletes who are in a major sports program at a large public university—the kind of athletes and the type of football atmosphere many Americans, college faculty in particular, often call into question. As one set of educational researchers note, "intercollegiate athletics is one of the significant filters through which the public looks at American postsecondary education" (Pascarella, Truckenmiller, Nora, Terenzini, Edison, and Hagedorn, 1999, p.1). The phrase "dumb jock" is ubiquitous, the amount of money spent on big-time college football programs unquestionably scandalous. At the same time, participation in college sports is at an all-time high. The number of athletes playing on intercollegiate teams in 2008-09 (the academic year this cohort graduated)

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topped out at 421,000 with 26,104 of them playing football at the elite Division I level (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2010).

The study offers a detailed look at educational data not available to reporters whose exposés about athletes' academic failures fuel public perception—nor, for that matter, to faculty within academe who uncritically carry forward long held stereotypes and misperceptions. The data comprise one sub-set of information collected as part of a larger project titled *The Literate Lives of Athletes: How a Division I Championship Football Program Graduated 100% of Its Senior Players*. With IRB approval and the cooperation of my university's Intercollegiate Athletics Program, the project attempts to discern the set of factors that coalesced to enable an entire senior cohort of football players to graduate within their NCAA eligibility period.

The "MU 26," as I have come to call them, accomplished this academic feat while simultaneously winning ten of their final season's fourteen games, including their divisional championship and a post-season bowl game. Twenty-five of the MU 26 were seniors on the University of Missouri's NCAA Division I football team in the autumn of 2008. One more player, who was actually still a "junior" by NCAA's reckoning, had already received his bachelor's degree and was in the process of completing his master's degree while playing out the remainder of his NCAA eligibility. All received undergraduate degrees in 2008-09. (This article uses "student-athlete," "student," "athlete," and "player" interchangeably to refer to the young men on the team.)

The essay examines three indices of players' reading acumen: 1) ACT reading and English scores used in the admissions process, along with grades earned in first-year composition; 2) impromptu responses about reading elicited during players' one-on-one interviews with me; and 3) their personal preferences for recreational reading. In general, these indices offer a rich, complex picture of these players' literate lives, a picture that defies simple stereotypes. Overall, the findings from this cohort suggest that college reading and writing instructors may want to reconsider the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes often held about high profile scholarship athletes. Ameliorating these views could allow for more productive relationships with student athletes in and out of the classroom, foster improved academic performance on students' parts, and perhaps result in greater satisfaction on instructors' parts.

## Method

The case study approach, according to Robert Stake (1994), is a part of scientific method, but its purpose is "not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (245). This report, then, does not address the many questions that Salvatori and Donahue raise, nor does it resolve the "don't, won't, can't" problem that Horning (2013) poses. But it can, as Stake points out, lead to valid generalizations if modifications are made to fit particular instances. Case studies' utility comes when practitioners and policy makers extend the reported experience to their own situations. The larger *Literate Lives* project, as well as this report of one subset of the data, is a qualitative study indebted to the principles established in Guba and Lincoln's *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (1989). These scholars' constructivist paradigm delineates a step-by-step process, which focuses on hermeneutic dialogue, ethical considerations, and the empowerment of all stakeholders. Using the principles that Guba and Lincoln espouse (though not all of the steps in their elaborate model), I was able to establish a level of trust with the student-athletes such that their one-on-one interviews with me, a relative stranger, reveal a spectrum of self-reported reading habits ranging from "Oh, I don't read at all" to "I read constantly."

Each of the twenty-six players met with me individually for a video-taped interview, many of which lasted close to an hour, which were later transcribed. I used an IRB-approved, generative protocol of twenty-some questions to elicit players' attitudes and experiences about their academic lives during the three to five years they spent as student-athletes at the university. Each signed a Consent to Participate form, in which I promised not to reveal any information that could potentially embarrass them, a commitment I reiterated at the start of each interview. I had access to their official academic records (transcripts), which enabled me

to ask specific questions about courses they had either excelled in or struggled with. Further, as former director of the university's WAC/WID program, I was familiar with many of the professors and courses the athletes referred to, and I was able to follow up with questions about specific assignments or teaching practices.

## Acknowledging College Athletics' Worst-case Scenarios

One doesn't have to look far to find examples of literacy problems among high profile athletes in the revenue-producing sport of college football. One of the better-known examples is that of Dexter Manley, who made it through four years at Oklahoma State University as a functional illiterate (Nyad, 1989). Following a distinguished NFL career with the Washington Redskins, the two-time Super Bowl winner tearfully confessed before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Education that until nearly age 30 he could neither read nor write. A less frequently remembered example is James Brooks, who played at Auburn for four years before becoming a first round draft pick by the San Diego Chargers (Downtown, 2000). Brooks' illiteracy was revealed when he was arrested for failing to pay over \$110,000 in child support. In court, Brooks admitted to the judge that he could not read the legal documents ordering him to make the monthly payments. His NFL running back coach later said, "I never put James in a position where he had to show me if he could read" (Downtown, "Maintaining the Veil," para. 9). More recently, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* carried the story of University of Memphis linebacker and defensive end Dasmine Cathey, who is struggling to complete a degree after tutoring himself to read by painstakingly reviewing a secret stash of elementary school learn-to-read books (Wolverton, 2012).

Another example, this one from the college basketball realm, is Kevin Ross who withdrew from Creighton University after three years when it was discovered that he had only elementary school level reading ability (Ross, 1983). His comments about reading in the early grades are particularly poignant: "I always felt self-conscious about my reading, but it didn't seem that I did any worse in school than a lot of others. I never liked to read, and I did it real slow, but so did a lot of other kids." At Creighton, it was a psychology class that revealed the depth of his deficit: "If you can't read, you can't understand," he told a magazine interviewer. Whitner and Myers (1986) cite Ross's story as an example that was used to enable yet another athlete to adjust to counseling he needed to deal with his reading difficulties. By turns shocking and heartbreaking, these stories help perpetuate the perception that underprepared athletes overpopulate our college classrooms.

The case of the MU 26 offers a compelling counterexample to these worst-case scenarios. Dexter Manley's graduation notwithstanding, graduation rates are one of the key indicators of student-athletes' academic achievement. And, the achievement of a 100% graduation rate among a Division I senior football cohort is unusual, particularly at a large, state-supported university where the pressure to win is intense and where athletes are presumed to have more leeway at admission time. The average Graduation Success Rate reported by the NCAA (2013) for entering cohorts in Division I from 1998 through 2001 is approximately 67%, far short of the 100% achieved by the MU 26.

## The MU 26 Cohort

The MU 26 are remarkable in their diversity. Their level of achievement in high school and their preparedness for college study vary widely. They come from a mix of rural, suburban, and urban high schools. Fifteen (58%) of the players are white; eleven (42%) are African American. Some, but not all, have parents who went to college. A few hail from comfortable socioeconomic backgrounds, others fit squarely into the American middle class, some come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They graduated from high school in as low as the 27th percentile to as high as the 98th. Ten (38%) finished in the upper quarter of their high school graduation classes; twelve (46%) finished in the lower half. Three were National Honor Society inductees in high school. Twenty-two (85%) are first-time college students; four

(15%) transferred from two-year colleges. Twenty-two received athletic scholarships: four were walk-on non-scholarship players. There is a large senior class (the following year's is smaller by a third). More than half come from Missouri; six are from Texas, two from Louisiana, and one each from Kansas, Oklahoma, and California. Most of them chose MU over other similarly competitive big time college football programs.

By the time the MU 26 graduated, their cumulative GPAs ranged from 2.0 (the minimum allowed) to 3.6 on a 4.0 scale. Several cycled on and off academic probation when their semester grades fell below the minimum allowed. All took courses during at least one summer session. They earned degrees in eleven different academic areas, spread across four colleges.

In this study, "senior" refers to the players on the team in 2008 who had achieved senior status as defined by the NCAA. It does not refer a group of student-athletes who entered the university together as a single cohort in the same year. In other words, some players who started with some of the MU 26 did not stay at the university long enough to become seniors. Others came later, as transfer students. Fifteen of the MU 26 took a redshirt year, effectively giving them five years to complete their college degree. Most enrolled in the university in 2004; others came in '05, '06, or '07. All graduated in 2008 or 2009.

## ACT Tests / Scores / Findings

The ACT, a standardized achievement test widely used in the college admission process, is administered annually to over 1.6 million students in the United States (ACT, Inc., 2013a). It aims to assess high school students' readiness to succeed in college through multiple choice subject-area tests in English, reading, mathematics, and science. An optional writing test has been available since 2005, which neither the NCAA nor the University of Missouri requires.

Dating to 1959, the ACT organization—formerly known as American College Testing—has evolved into an integrated, "seamless" system of multiple-choice testing that begins for some students as early as the eighth grade. The most relevant aspects of the system for a discussion of the MU 26 are ACT's College Readiness Standards and Benchmark Scores. ACT, Inc. defines readiness as the acquisition of skills and knowledge students need to succeed in credit-bearing, first-year college courses without the need for remediation (2011). The College Readiness Standards for all four subject areas, plus the writing exam, comprise a detailed thirty-two page rubric, fourteen of which deal with reading and English, all downloadable from ACT's website. Used in conjunction with these standards, ACT's College Readiness Benchmark Scores are established for each of the subject areas and are intended to predict students' success in the corresponding first-year college courses. The benchmark score for reading is 21; for English, 18 (ACT, Inc., 2013c). A high school student receiving ACT's reading benchmark score of 21 could expect a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher or a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher in a "reading dependent" course in the social sciences or humanities. A high school student receiving ACT's English benchmark score of 18 could expect 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher or a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher in English composition.

ACT suggests that "Because no test can measure educational development with absolute precision, it's best to think of ... ACT scores as a range rather than as a precise point" (2013d). So, a composite score of any number probably indicates a level of educational development at that score, plus or minus one. (Score-range as opposed to precise point score becomes relevant later in the discussion of how the MU 26 are situated relative to the general population of students.) Because of ACT's wide use historically and because the MU 26's scores on it are available, the instrument offers one potentially revealing measure of players' reading acumen.

## ACT and the MU 26

Twenty of the MU 26 took the ACT college entrance exam as required for admission to the university. Of the six who did not take the ACT, two took the SAT and four were not required to submit a college entrance

exam score because they had already earned A.A. degrees at the two-year colleges from which they transferred. The degree to which any of the MU 26 spent time pouring over test prep books, taking practice exams, or availing themselves of test preparation courses is unknown, although it is safe to assume that their high school counselors—knowing that these athletes were competing for Division I athletic scholarship slots at NCAA institutions that require college entrance exam scores—would have advised the athletes to some degree on how to prepare. ACT acknowledges that one of the most common uses of its assessment is to determine eligibility to play varsity athletics at NCAA institutions (Andrews & Ziomek, 1998).

One of the MU 26 took both the ACT and SAT, perhaps hoping for a scholarship, football or otherwise, at an east or west coast school where SAT scores are used more frequently than the ACT. Taking the exam more than once is common, as students often seek to improve their scores and know that ACT will report only the scores that takers choose to have sent. When retesting, examinees with the lowest scores gain the most, while examinees with the highest scores are most likely to see scores decrease (Andrews & Ziomek, 1998). ACT's website offers a list of reasons why students might want to repeat the exam, noting that fifty-seven per cent who retest increase their composite score, while twenty-one per cent stay the same and twenty-two per cent decrease (ACT, Inc., 2013b).

Of the twenty MU 26 students who took the ACT, ten tested once; six tested twice; three tested three times; and one tested four times. Most saw their scores improve with each taking, while a few scores did go down, though not substantially. I use the highest score achieved in the reading and English categories for this analysis. All twenty took the exam between 2002 and 2006, with the majority taking it in 2003 or 2004.

## How the MU 26 Scored

- The MU 26 earned *composite* ACT scores ranging from a low of 12 to a high of 30 (out of 36), for an average of 21—placing the cohort four points below the average of 25 earned by all MU students who entered the university at approximately the same time.
- The MU 26 earned *reading* ACT scores ranging from a low of 12 to a high of 30 (of 36), for an average of 21, meeting ACT's reading benchmark of 21.
- The MU 26 earned *English* ACT scores ranging from a low of 11 to a high of 34 (of 36), for an average of 21, or three points higher than ACT's benchmark of 18.

This range of composite, reading, and English scores represents an extraordinarily wide degree of "readiness to succeed" within the cohort, as measured by ACT. Only one of the MU 26 received scores at the low end of the range—a composite of 12, a reading score of 12, and an English score of 11. On the other end of the spectrum, one of the MU 26 scored well above the average of all MU students entering the university at approximately the same time; he earned a composite score of 30, a reading score of 30, and an English score of 34, the latter just two points below the maximum possible 36.

Seven of the MU 26 received composite scores of 24 to 30 (24 being minus one point of the MU general population average of 25 and therefore in the "probable" range of their educational development). In other words, nearly a third of the cohort placed at or above the average of their general population student peers (non-athletes)

## ACT Reading Test and the MU 26

ACT's reading test contains four passages, each about 750 words long, from works in the humanities, prose fiction, social sciences, and natural sciences (Ehrenhaft, Lehrman, Mundsack, & Obrecht, 2001, p. 285). Each passage is followed by ten multiple-choice questions. Three categories of reading passages are used: "Uncomplicated Informational," "More Challenging Informational," and "Complex Informational." And

five textual elements are itemized in ACT's Reading Standards rubric: 1) main ideas and author's approach; 2) supporting details; 3) sequential, comparative, and cause-effect relationships; 4) meanings of words; and 5) generalizations and conclusions. ACT says the questions require students "to derive meaning from texts by referring to what is explicitly stated and reasoning to determine implicit meanings and to draw conclusions, comparisons, and generalizations" (2006). Test takers have thirty-five minutes to complete the test.

Of the twenty MU 26 who took the ACT, half received a reading readiness score of 21 or above while half scored below. That is, half achieved the benchmark established by ACT indicating a high probability of success (a 75% chance of earning a course grade of C or better or a 50% chance of earning a B or better) in first-year courses generally considered to be "reading dependent." The half who scored below 21 were presumably not "ready to succeed" in reading-dependent courses.

This finding places the MU 26 squarely beside the fifty-one percent of American students who ACT's research shows are ready for college and workplace reading (2006). ACT's research is based on the organization's 2004-05 test results, a time line close to when the MU 26 were taking the test.

ACT's research also shows that some groups of students—e.g., males, African Americans, and those whose parents have annual incomes below \$30,000—can be as much as 1.5 to 2.5 times *less* likely to be ready for college-level reading (2006). Given that some of the MU 26 are in this higher risk population, it seems noteworthy that the cohort as a whole still compares favorably to the fifty-one per cent of the overall American college-going population that is "college ready" for reading.

## Grades in reading-dependent courses

Insofar as the MU 26's grades in first-year reading-dependent courses are concerned, ACT seems to have been an accurate predictor of how these students would perform. Using the same first-year reading-dependent courses that ACT uses to derive its College Readiness Benchmark for reading (history, psychology, sociology, political science, and economics), the MU 26 who scored 21 or above on the benchmark, earned a grade point average (GPA) of 2.89 on a 4.0 scale, or fractionally under a B in their reading-dependent courses. The MU 26 who scored 20 or below on the benchmark earned a GPA of 1.71 on a 4.0 scale, or C- in their reading-dependent courses.

To describe these reading-dependent courses more fully, all but one of the MU 26 took a variety of first-year courses in history, political science, psychology, sociology, and both micro- and macro-economics. (The one student who did not take any arrived at the university with a clear focus on a science-based major and enrolled early on in science and foreign language classes.) Approximately one grade point differentiates the above-benchmark scorers from the below-benchmark scorers in each reading-dependent course:

### Average of Grades Earned by MU 26 Student Athletes in First-Year Reading-Dependent Courses

Course/Discipline	Above-benchmark (21 & up) Scorers	Below-benchmark (20 & down) Scorers
History	3.3 (B+)	2.28 (C+)
Economics	3.28 (B+)	1.8 (C-)
Psychology	3.0 (B)	1.83 (C-)

Sociology	2.3 (C+)	1.7 (C-)
Political Science	1.85 (C-)	1.0 (D)

## ACT English (First-Year Composition) Test & the MU 26

The English test consists of seventy-five multiple-choice questions based on five prose passages, and students have forty-five minutes to complete the test (Ehrenhaft, Lehrman, Mundsack, and Obrecht, 2001, p. 71). The test assesses six elements of effective writing in two broad categories: 1) usage and mechanics, which includes punctuation, grammar and usage, sentence structure, and 2) rhetorical skills, which includes strategy, organization, and style (2006).

The MU 26 performed better on the English test than on the reading test: sixteen (compared to ten) scored above ACT's benchmark, with four scoring below. According to ACT, then, sixteen of the MU 26 should have a 75% chance of earning a course grade of C or better or a 50% chance of earning a B or better in first-year composition. Scores from the MU 26 in the above-the-benchmark range from a low of 19 to a high of 34, indicating "readiness" for success in first-year composition. Scores from the MU 26 in the below-the-benchmark are 11 (for one) and 15 (for three).

## Grades in English courses

Overall, the MU 26 earned grades in Missouri's first-year composition course, English 1000: Exposition and Argumentation (itself a reading-dependent course), ranging from F to A-. The cohort's GPA is 2.26 on a 4.0 scale (including D and F grades), or fractionally under a C+. The three who earned F's and D's on their first taking of the course repeated it, since a grade of C- is the minimum that satisfies the university's General Education requirement. All of those whose English benchmark scores are above 18 earned C's or B's in first-year composition, as ACT predicted. One earned an A-. The four whose English scores are below 18 are those who, according to ACT, might have needed "remediation" in English composition.

Here the story becomes a little more complex, at least on the local institutional research level. When all students are admitted to the university, the ACT benchmark of 18 is used as a cut-off to recommend placement into either "regular" or "stretch" versions of English 1000. The sixteen who met the ACT English benchmark were advised into regular English 1000. The four who scored 17 or below, along with six other MU 26 students (transfers and several who took the SAT), were recommended to take stretch English 1000.

## The Sub-story of "Stretch" English

Stretch composition courses date to the early 1990's and are based on the premise that so-called "basic" writers are best served by having access to the same course content required of more prepared students—if longer time is spent on instruction and practice. The regular course is "stretched out," in other words, in some way. Usually, course numbering is the same for regular and stretch versions; tuition is the same; reporting of grades is the same. No penalties accrue for taking stretch versions. (See Glau, for example.) Like these courses taught elsewhere, Missouri's version of stretch English was intended to enroll students who were thought to need additional help to pass the course—precisely those of the MU 26 who scored below ACT's English benchmark of 18.

Theoretically, the regular and stretch versions of English 1000 were similar, with the exception that stretch added one extra day of instruction per week during which an additional one-hour tutorial was taught by stretch instructors to students enrolled in a different stretch section than their own. (The cross tutorials were apparently thought to offer students enhanced benefits by virtue of the instructors' differing

perspectives.) However, neither the curricula for regular nor stretch English was standardized or monitored, so there is no way to know how similar the two versions of the courses may have been.

Moreover, despite longstanding objections from Composition Studies assessment scholars, local Composition Program professionals never debated using ACT as the screening instrument, according to one person with knowledge of the Program's history. The only issues debated were practical ones related to administering the course: stretch was harder to staff because instructors resisted the extra effort required, less independence was allowed in the curriculum, and no extra compensation was offered. From stretch instructors' point of view, the main advantages were the smaller class size (ten students instead of twenty) and the learning community atmosphere that resulted from knowing other instructors' curricula via the tutorial exchanges with one another's classes.

Despite the good intentions of well-meaning supervisors who oversaw stretch English (and no doubt by many of the instructors who volunteered to teach stretch sections), no research was ever done once students enrolled in stretch sections or after they finished the course. No comparisons were made of students' performance in the stretch curriculum *vis a vis* regular sections, no studies done to determine whether stretch was, in fact, providing the intended benefits. Worse, there was not even a way to know whether or not students who were recommended to take the stretch version did so. Students were free to ignore the recommendation and enroll in regular English if they wished. Both stretch and regular English 1000 appear on student transcripts without any differentiating marker, and there exists no practical way to determine after the fact which course students took.

At one point, the university's Registration office encountered mechanical difficulty in setting up stretch sections, causing the course to be temporarily suspended. Administrators to whom the Composition Program reported, who funded the course and had been questioning its extra cost, seized the opportunity to quit offering it entirely, and the course passed quietly, almost imperceptibly, out of existence. Whether the MU 26 who were recommended to take stretch English did so, and whether the course helped them or not, is unknown.

## Standardized Assessment and the MU 26

For all the attention to—and cost of—students' preparing for, taking and retaking the ACT, and requesting which sets of scores should be reported to colleges, the MU 26's ACT reading and English scores seem to have amounted to very little. It is reassuring to know that nearly one-third of the cohort placed at or above their general population peers. And it's good to know that the cohort lines up precisely with the half of other American college students who ACT determines are "ready" for college and workplace reading.

But the bottom line is that the university requires a C- or better in first-year composition to pass the university's General Education requirements, to move on to the university's two required writing-intensive courses, and to graduate. And the Intercollegiate Athletics Program, vested as it is in student-athletes' academic success (not least in part due to NCAA regulations), provides academic tutoring for all courses including first-year composition and those that are reading-dependent. Regular study hall time is mandatory for first-year student-athletes, as well as for those who fall below given standards. Several of the players report working "hard" to "stay out" of study hall once they finish their first year. The MU 26 accomplished what they had to do to stay in school and on the team.

Two quantitative studies offer further evidence that mitigate the value of standardized assessment for predicting college outcomes in reading and English. A meta-analysis of 109 studies by Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, and Carlstrom (2004) shows that psychosocial and study skills—things like motivation, goals, institutional commitment, social support, and self-concept—are more influential than socioeconomic status, standardized achievement (read: ACT), and high school GPA in predicting college outcomes. And a study by Simons and Van Rheenen (2000) published in *Journal of College Reading and*

*Learning* points out that, even though NCAA standards rely in part on ACT and SAT scores, non-cognitive factors such as motivation to achieve play a critical role in student athletes' academic performance.

Perhaps the final word on the value of ACT scores for student-athletes should go to Peter Smagorinsky, whose research takes a self-described Vygotskian perspective on the teaching and learning of literacy practices. After the prestigious *Educational Researcher* published four studies of standardized reading assessment, the journal's editors invited Smagorinsky to critique the work. His diplomatic reply (2009) finds the research "problematic" and "one-dimensional," not because it reduces data to numbers, but because of "the authors' questionable assumptions about what it means to read and to teach reading" (p. 522). Standardized assessment, he argues, assumes that reading is a self-evident construct, a discrete act, an a-cultural act, and that reading instruction is best managed by policy and assessment experts. As the title of his critique suggests, Smagorinsky believes that standardized reading assessment "collides" with the "incommensurate" cultural practice of reading. Arguing that the assumptions brought to bear by proponents of standardized reading assessment lack sufficient common ground with his own culturally-based assumptions, he says that he cannot compare them. Whereas standardized reading assessment requires that teachers follow standardized practices, he prefers a system whereby teachers hold more authority, autonomy, and judgment "even if such singular instruction defies the assessment apparatus..." (526). Smagorinsky's critique resonates with many issues Composition scholars have with ACT and similar standardized assessments. Despite the significant impact ACT has on U.S. educational assessment writ large, the following two indices of MU 26's reading acumen may be more revealing of the literacy practices in their day-to-day lives.

## Interview Responses about Reading

Because the larger *Literate Lives* study concerns the totality of factors that led to the MU 26 graduating, the IRB-approved protocol of questions concerns their attitudes and experiences of collegiate life broadly construed. Surprising though it may be, the original protocol did not include a question specifically about reading for college courses. Apart from the section below, on players' personal reading preferences, their responses about reading emerged spontaneously in the context of other issues. In general, these responses reflect a range similar to their cohort's diverse profile: the MU 26 claim everything from "I never read" to "I read a lot."

Interviews were conducted in the large facility where student-athletes eat meals, attend study hall, and meet with tutors, coaches, and other athletics personnel—on their own turf, so they would feel at ease. As seniors, these students were long accustomed to being videotaped for practice, games, and press interviews. Additionally, the staff member who processes athletes' scholarship checks assisted with videotaping, so her presence added friendly familiarity to our sessions. And players had met me when I explained the project during their senior-exit meeting with the Athletic Director, at which time I also solicited their consent to participate. All agreed. Conducting the interviews proceeded straightforwardly.

## Challenging Courses vs. Reading-dependent Courses

After establishing a comfortable, positive rapport in each interview by first talking about courses the MU 26 had been successful in, the next question I put to each of the interviewees was, "What classes did you find especially challenging and how did you manage them?" Of twenty-three different classes they cite from the entirety of their three to five years as students, reading-dependent courses are not at the top of the list. In fact, as a category, reading-dependent classes come in third. At the top of the list is the science curriculum—biology, medical microbiology, botany, chemistry, and physics. The second category comprises math—algebra, calculus, and statistics. Only in the third category are classes that ACT defines as reading-dependent—micro- and macro-economics with five mentions, then history, political science, and

psychology with one mention each. A final fourth category includes business-related courses—management, accounting, and law.

With regard to managing those challenging courses, players' explanations are as different as the individuals themselves. Replies range from "I set aside study time" to "I did the minimum, got the grade, and got out." Several report simply asking for help from various people—teachers, tutors, various mentors, fellow students, a girlfriend. One athlete, an engineering major, says

I spent extra time, pushed myself, and spent extra time with [my] teachers. The trick to me is getting the pattern down on different things and how they interlock. Basically, just putting the time in. Complete silence. Figuring out the patterns and the way that you learn.

Another, who chose to forego his goal of becoming a history teacher because practice teaching would have conflicted with the football practice schedule, comments on the twenty-five- to thirty-page articles assigned to be read in his history class each week—not because of their length *per se*, but because the quality of the scanning made them difficult to read on a computer.

## Parents & Reading

Seven players invoke parental influence as an explanation for their reading habits. "[My parents] were always big into doin' book reports and everything. Still to this day I read quite a lot," notes the would-be history teacher who nonetheless cautions that, "It's what you're into. I've never found a lot of books that other people read to be that exciting [to me]." He acknowledges that he's "got a nice little collection [of reading in progress] goin', but I still think if it's not interesting to you, you're not gonna read it."

Another, who now plays in the NFL, remembers that, "My parents would always encourage me to get my reading done even if I didn't want to....They never pushed me, but they always encouraged me to read....my mom reads a lot." And another, who arrived at the university having already earned twenty-one college credits while still in high school, recalls with fondness the good natured Sunday dinner-table competitions he engaged in with his overachieving cousins about their various educational pursuits. "My mom wonders how I can go from reading all the books I did when I was in grade school, to not reading too many books lately," he recalls. "I really don't do too much 'fun' reading right now." He is one of several who lament lack of time for reading and needing to prioritize limited time to reading textbooks for classes.

Two others who also invoke memories of parental encouragement tie their interest in reading to their parents' occupations as teachers, one whose mother teaches first grade, the other whose father teaches high school English. The latter offers this example:

When I was thirteen or fourteen, my dad told me if I could read *Moby Dick* and explain it and have an intelligent discussion with him by the time I was sixteen, he'd buy me the car I wanted....My number one book of all time would have to be *The Great Gatsby*...It's my favorite book...The way F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, you know, the way he developed those characters almost made me feel like you were at, you know, some of those parties that he was throwing...that you were *in* the book. Very few other authors or very few other stories that I've read have ever felt like that.

This player got the car he wanted, which he concedes was never really in question anyway, suggesting a ruse on his father's part to get him to read *Moby Dick* earlier than he otherwise might have. One player notes that his difficult transition to college life included the *absence* of parental influence, while simultaneously commenting on the Athletics Department's approach: "You take away all parental guidance—even though this place gives you great academic guidance, they're not hovering. They don't sit there and look down over your shoulder to make sure you're doing this."

## Motivations to Read

Beyond parental encouragement, the MU 26 describe multiple motivations for their reading:

- Coaches "breathing down your back" (in reference to reading the playbook);
- Life-long goals (in reference to reading about martial arts and "always wanting to be a samurai");
- Applying lessons learned to the football field (in reference to reading about leadership skills);
- Applying values learned to life (in reference to reading Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*);
- Finding yourself (in reference to one player's personal definition of what a "good book" does);
- Interviewing for a job (in reference to Teach for America's required reading list);
- Escaping from the daily pressure to "make yourself a better person" (in apologetic reference for reading "a lot" of fiction);
- Sheer interest in a subject (in reference to the "nifty little facts" to found in military history books);

This partial list—again, unprompted and in the context of other issues—echoes in part an observation made by Joliffe and Harl (2008) after they studied a similar sized cohort of first-year composition students at the University of Arkansas: "We found students who were actively involved in their own programs of reading aimed at values clarification, personal enrichment, and career preparation. In short, we discovered students who were extremely engaged with their reading but not with the reading that their classes required" (p. 600). While the MU 26 interviews offer no evidence that they were *not* reading what classes required, a possible explanation for the difference between them and the Arkansas first-year students is the MU 26's senior-class status. Many of them note the maturity they achieved as they progressed through the three to five years of their academic programs. As they got closer to graduation, their motivation to finish their degrees increased. They specifically acknowledge the degree to which they have changed from when they entered college. Their future goals are clarified, the stakes higher, and their investment in their educations more established.

## What the MU 26 Didn't Say About Reading

In 500-plus pages of transcribed interviews, there are no references to an active *dislike* of reading, or to problems encountered with reading in elementary or secondary school, or to avoidance techniques applied to required reading for university classes. Of course, that doesn't suggest none exist; it is simply to note they aren't mentioned. Players' lack of complaints about reading could be attributed to my not probing for them; to the larger purpose of the study (which is not on reading *per se*); and to the mostly celebratory impetus for the project itself (the entire cohort graduating), all of which led to generally positive responses overall.

Still, conversation during the interview sessions was reasonably relaxed, and players did openly discuss frustrations encountered along the way toward earning their degrees. When spontaneous negative comments about reading did occur, the context was lack of time imposed by the demands of the sport. "I haven't read a book *not* for class in I don't know how long," says one. "Mostly now [my time is spent] focusing on school and school books, finance books, real estate..." notes a business major whose degree is in Finance and Banking. Reflecting on the reading he had enjoyed in grade school, one player wistfully notes, "Maybe when I have more free time, that'd be something I'd like to do..." his voice trailing off.

Lack of time—and lack of energy at the end of long days filled with classes, meetings, practice, travel, work outs, and games—is a key theme throughout the larger study. While grateful for the scholarship opportunity to play football, many of the MU 26 acknowledge that they haven't been able to focus more on their academic work at the university. That finding is consistent with a survey of over 2300 student-athletes' experiences in Division I football programs nationally. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) conclude:

[R]esponses showed a generally positive picture of college life. While they regret that their participation in varsity athletics means that they miss out on some aspects of college life, both curricular and co-curricular, they value their athletics participation and believe that it both instills values independent of those derived from other aspects of college and enhances particular skills and their overall college experience. They also report that the trade-offs they make in order to compete are acceptable or more than acceptable. (para. 1)

Three different interview questions were designed to elicit negative responses about their educational experiences (e.g., "Did you face any hardships that 'regular' students don't?"). And the MU 26 do cite a variety of constraints that result from dedication to their sport, such as the rigid schedule, lack of free time, and missing out on things at home. Nearly all, though, attribute their academic success to acquiring time management skills as a matter of necessity. Significantly, they do not report feeling scholastically inferior to their non-athletic peers. They do not report, "I simply did *not* understand the text that professor assigned" or "I was *lost* in that class." Rather, when commenting on academic challenges, the typical response is, "Get it done."

### A Reading Highlight

Written into the head coach's contract is an expectation that football players will participate in community service and charitable work, and student-athletes know they'll be contributing to the community in some way when they accept a football scholarship. Nine of the MU 26 chose to participate in reading programs for elementary school children; only the "Bowl for Kids' Sake" charity event drew more volunteers. Two of the MU 26 worked with the university's Starlight Reading program, a partnership between Intercollegiate Athletics and the College of Education. Every Wednesday at 10:00 a.m., volunteers connect via satellite with classrooms around the state to read to school children and then engage in an interactive question and answer session. Other MU 26 members went to schools in the city, reading in person to excited youngsters who know these players well through the local media and (the lucky ones) by attending Saturday games with their parents.

These are stories the local press likes to feature, and the university doesn't mind the positive publicity. Chad Bass' fifth-graders at Parkade School are among those who've benefited from student-athlete readers (Braden, 2009). Bass' Friday mystery guest readers include at least two of the MU 26—plus the Athletic Director and several of his assistants. Kids don't know who's coming until the athlete walks in the door. Bass says for some students, guessing who each week's reader will be increases the anticipation. Bass tells me that players read "cold, on the spot," usually from chapter books, picking up unrehearsed from where the last reader left off (Personal Interview). Bass comments, "That was kind of a neat thing for the kids to see. You could tell the athletes were probably reading for the first time in front of kids." Unscripted questions like "Were there any players on the team you didn't get along with?" and "Do you like going to class?" led to candid answers that Bass describes as "very important" for fifth-graders learning about balancing athletics with academics and about life in general.

Reading Studies scholar Connie Juel (1991) has documented the benefits of student-athletes working with school children—for both children and athletes. She attributes the success of her pioneering program to: 1) college students' (especially those from minority groups, as three of the nine MU 26 volunteer readers are) ability to serve as role models for young at-risk students; 2) some readers sharing a culture of poverty experienced by some of the students; 3) student-athletes believing the children can learn and succeed; and 4) some readers' own struggle to learn to read.

Not all of the MU 26 reading volunteers fit Juel's four categories, nor did they formally tutor the children on a protracted basis. Nonetheless, their work brought them into contact with scores of impressionable

children who observed role models engaging in reading. All nine of the MU 26 describe their volunteer reading in positive terms. This player's interview response is typical:

It was a nice, humbling experience. It kept a level head on all our shoulders....A lot of us have younger sisters and brothers, and it was just fun....You always felt like this was what we needed to do to show the community and the young kids that we don't *just* play ball. We are people. We like to share. We like to love. We like to play. We like to joke around and have fun with one another. And it's not always just about football and school....It never felt like we was obligated to do this. It was always something that we knew in our hearts that needed to be done.

Cynics might suggest that mandating community service fails to instill genuine altruism and serves mainly to deliver good press for the football program. Given opportunity to register discontent with this expectation, however, the MU 26 unanimously endorse the concept of "giving back to the community" that supports them. That so many of them choose reading-related activities from among a wide range of possible avenues of involvement speaks to the multiple sides of their literate lives.

## A Reductive Understanding of What Reading Is

Just as many students conceive of writing in its most simplistic terms—thinking of only final, formal products, say, while omitting invention, research, and multiple drafts—several of the MU 26, in their off-the-cuff remarks about reading, do the same. The player who staunchly maintains that he "never reads," nonetheless comments on the growth of the Internet and its effect on his age group: "There's so many different ways to read, but I just was never into reading when I was younger." He goes on to acknowledge frequent reading of such texts as Internet sources, newspapers, and sports magazines. Another who claims not to like reading "that much," nonetheless mentions having enjoyed reading excerpts of Levitt and Dubner's *Freakonomics* and wanting to read the whole book. He, too, mentions reading "a lot" of magazines.

## Personal Preferences for Reading

Of the three indices examined in this study, personal preference in reading shows the most commonality among the MU 26, along with further evidence of the cohort's diversity. It was one of the players who, as he was leaving the interview room, turned to ask, "Would you like to know what I've been reading?" and began reeling off a lengthy list of books. Unfortunately, the camera was turned off, and I neglected to capture his impressive list; fortunately, he was only the third interviewee and henceforward the remainder replied to the question "What have you been reading lately and is there anything you'd care to recommend to others?"

## Sports

A good number of the MU 26 report reading about sports, sports figures, and sports themes. Stories about athletes, biographies, autobiographies, examples of leadership, and lessons they can apply on the football field are high on their radar. Joe Torre's autobiography *The Yankee Years* and Mark Kriegel's biography *Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich* are seen as examples of "how athletes deal with situations." Jose Conesco's *Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, and How Baseball Got Big*; Steve Richardson's *Then Pinkel Said to Smith: The Best Missouri Tigers Stories Ever Told*; and *LT: Over the Edge: Tackling Quarterbacks, Drugs, and a World Beyond Football* by Lawrence Taylor and Steve Serby are among the book titles they mention, along with multiple references to sports magazines.

## History

Another frequently mentioned category is history, especially martial arts and military history. A Communication major and self-described "big history guy," recalls being particularly moved by a book

about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City. The player who relished competitive Sunday conversations with his cousins cites Civil War and World War II books as central to his reading, even tying social history into his pursuits: "My grandma says she remembers knitting 8" x 8" squares in high school to make blankets [for soldiers]. It's crazy how much military factual stuff there is." Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and *Samurai Strategies: 42 Martial Secrets from Musashi's Book of Five Rings* by Boye Lafayette De Mente and Michihiro Matsumoto are titles specifically named in this category.

## Religious and Inspirational

A third category for personal preference reading relates to religious and inspirational themes. One player, who describes having gotten off to a "rough start" in life but thought he might like to own a business after graduation, reports reading a book suggested by a trusted professor from whom he'd taken a course in Agriculture: "It's called *Let Your Life Speak* [subtitled *Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, by Parker Palmer] and it's pretty much just different situations you go through to get to a certain place, different situations to find yourself, your real self." Another reports being newly focused on the religious aspect of his life and just beginning to acquire his own books on that theme. *In Step With God: Understanding His Ways and Plans for Your Life* by Charles Stanley is the book he cites. A third, who earlier had said, "I haven't read a book *not* for class in I don't know how long," references the Bible along with Rick Warren's best seller *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* Continuing, this student says:

Any time I read something or listen to somebody speak, I try to take at least one point and I try to work it into my life and try to—I won't say change my life—but try to live by that and so that's kind of what I do and just try to take one thing and learn one thing out of each chapter.

The underlying suggestion behind the titles in this category is that these athletes, as well as many other of the MU 26, seem to be actively seeking insight to apply to their future lives and careers. If Joliffe and Harl (2008) describe the students in their study as connecting texts with "their emerging sense of themselves as adults in the world" (p. 607), the MU 26 could be described as already knowing they are adults in the world who will soon need to make sound decisions about how to proceed. That they might also be talking amongst themselves about this pressing, existential topic—and, given their recent or upcoming graduations, likely receiving advice from their coaches—could be seen in the comment of the player who almost seems to apologize for his reading habits: "I read a lot, but [it doesn't] pertain to sports or making yourself a better person. For some reason, I'm into the fiction books, so...they're not the best books to read if you're like...they were pretty much like an escape more than anything."

## Fiction and Literature

The foregoing categories comprise titles, themes, and habits around which the MU 26 cohere. The *differences* in the MU 26's reading preferences appear in the diverse titles in fiction and literature they report reading, shown here in alphabetical order by author:

- *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Sherman Alexie
- *Angels and Demons*, Dan Brown
- *Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown
- *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald
- *The Pillars of the Earth*, Ken Follett
- *Pelican Brief*, John Grisham
- *The Stand*, Stephen King
- *Time Traveler's Wife*, Audrey Niffenegger

- 1984, George Orwell
- *Harry Potter* (series), J. K. Rowling
- *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak

None of the titles represent required course reading; all represent personal reading done for pleasure. Only two of the authors garner citations by more than one athlete—Brown and Rowling. Of the three who mention one or the other of Brown's books, one student who self-describes as "not a big reader...[who doesn't] like to read that much" nonetheless notes that he read both of Brown's books quickly and didn't want to put them down. He was "excited" to see *Angels and Demons* coming out as a film.

One theme from the larger study—the overwhelming tiredness that results from the physical and mental demands of each day—coincides with reading in an unexpected way. One player says, of the coach, "He keeps us so busy...to where we're like, 'I don't want to do anything else. I'm just going to go home. Go lay down.'...Your body be sore. That's all you're going to do is just go home and lay down and study or read a book." When pressed on what he'd read, though, this player first elicits a promise from me not to laugh at his answer. "I like *Harry Potter*," he admits. "It's so much better than the movie...it describes more. It puts you *there*. It describes stuff you see in the movie, but it describes it more. Or there's stuff that you wouldn't pay attention to in the movie." Another MU 26 *Harry Potter* fan isn't at all reticent about reading books for a supposedly younger audience, proclaiming *Potter* his "number one favorite" and noting that he owns the entire series. In fact, he'd bought a supplemental volume of fairy tales that "people in the wizarding world" are reading.

The remaining, eclectic titles are ones that interviewees invoke randomly, with one mention each. The second *Harry Potter* fan above further notes that he reads "a whole lot of different kinds of books" and reads "quite often...poetry books, books on relationships...I like having a wide base of information."

All of these examples offer evidence that the MU 26 read often and widely and for more purposes than those who are skeptical of student-athletes might expect. Even though the study was not designed to elicit information about the cohort's ability to perform the critical task of reading difficult texts assigned in college classes, these athletes nonetheless spontaneously, willingly discuss the "real" reading of their everyday lives. Their remarks constitute examples of literate activity valued within our culture.

## Conclusion

Prevailing public perception would likely consign the MU 26 to a much lower educational status than these findings show they warrant. All of these players succeeded in earning undergraduate degrees by the same standards that their general population (non-athlete) peers were held to. At the very least, this cohort demonstrates that high profile athletes involved in big time football programs should not be assumed to be deficient in reading ability in ways that will deter them from completing an undergraduate degree. More important, the data show that the MU 26 read a variety of texts for a variety of reasons—and that they do, in fact, have a rich array of reading interests and practices.

We need more studies, though, about *both* the everyday reading practices of all athletes *and* about the critical reading skills they bring to difficult texts assigned throughout the curricula. How does this cohort compare with others? How well can student athletes discern an author's underlying assumptions? How well can they evaluate an author's evidence for a claim—or marshal their own to make an argument? Do athletes differ sufficiently from general population students in these tasks to warrant studying them as a separate group? How can we teach student athletes in ways that maximize their college reading and learning?

The findings in all three of these indices are not what I expected going into the *Literate Lives* project. Given the general attitudes and derisive comments so often heard in the halls of academe, I did not anticipate that one of the athletes would have an ACT English score just two points shy of the best possible. I did not

anticipate that one of the athletes would have arrived at the university having already completed twenty-one college credits in high school and go on to complete a Master's degree while still under his NCAA eligibility period. I did not anticipate the diverse list of personal reading they report engaging in. And while I had a general sense that "coaches and, more importantly, student-athletes operate within a complex discursive world," as J. Michael Rifkenberg (2012) points out, I did not anticipate the mostly positive comments they would make about reading. I suspect that their reading habits are wider and richer than many others would expect, too.

We stereotype high-profile athletes at our peril—and theirs. Rather than assuming the worst, faculty should ask, care about, and tap into student-athletes' reading interests, as the Agriculture professor did when he gave a lower performing student Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*. When reading assignments can be tailored to students' interests, we should allow it, knowing their level of engagement will be greater. Most of all, it's time to let go of the old stereotypes and see student athletes as the individual, diverse, richly literate people they are. We shouldn't assume that athletes don't, won't, and can't read. The MU 26 prove otherwise.

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