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Student-Athlete Educational Perceptions:

A Comparative Study of Division I and Division III Student-Athletes

Although intercollegiate athletics exist in numerous countries around the world, nowhere does it have the popularity that it does in the United States. College sports have become increasingly important in American society since the 1930's. The extent of participation and competition that results from these organizations can be measured by the number of universities that participate, the number of male and female athletes that participate, and the number of sports being played. Sports are so integral to our culture that it would be difficult for our society's pro-sports mindset to imagine American life without intercollegiate athletic programs (Bowen & Levin, 2003).

Recent studies have shown that there is increasing concern about issues of balance and the beneficial impacts of athletics. From my perspective, the contribution that athletics makes should strengthen the overall educational experience for college students, not take away from it. Although I cannot generalize for all student-athletes, based on the two institutions that I compared in my study, I found that students-athletes who choose to attend Division III institutions value their education more than student-

athletes who choose to attend Division I institutions. I believe that my research is significant because deciding where one will attend college is one of the most important decisions in young adults' life. The cost of attendance, which rises annually, also makes it a big investment. This decision is often more complex for student-athletes because they have dual-interests and they must consider what institution will fit their academic needs and athletic interest best. I believe that it is the schools obligation to serve the needs of their student-athletes and to ensure that there is a mutual understanding of what they expect from one another.

Previous Research

America's passion for sport has brought student athletes to the forefront of numerous academic studies. Student-athlete perceptions and the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance are two angles that have been studied to better understand student-athletes. Universities place a heavy burden on student-athletes because they expected them to meet the same academic demands as other students and also be successful in their respective athletic domain. The pressure to perform academically is often compromised by spending time away from classes for athletic competitions, satisfying demanding coaches whose livelihood depends upon their athletic performance, and maintaining good self-esteem by performing up to their own, coaches' and family and friends' expectations. Herbert D. Simons' study of the academic motivations of student-athletes found that a substantial proportion of athletes see themselves as stigmatized in the academic community and that they were perceived negatively by professors, TA's and other students. These negative perceptions are embodied in the 'dumb jock' stereotype that states that athletes lack the motivation and

intelligence to succeed academically at the intercollegiate level (Snyder, 1996). They are seen as academically unqualified and illegitimate students whose only interest is athletics and who receive special treatment from professors and others. The perception is that in order to remain eligible and participate in sports they put in minimum effort, do little academic work, take easy classes and have others do their work for them. These conclusions are instrumental to my research because while Simons' research focused strictly on Division I student-athletes, I want to see if these stigmas are consistent across the different levels of competition (Simons, 1999).

There is a received wisdom that the student experiences of student-athletes are deficient and that student-athletes are, and are treated as, athletes first and students second. Josephine R. Potuto surveyed student-athletes at eighteen Division IA schools in an attempt to learn what they experience as students and how they assess those experiences. The student-athlete responses showed a generally positive picture of college life. The participants expressed they regret that their participation in athletics meant that they miss out on some aspects of college life, both curricular and co-curricular. Participants also showed they value their athletics participation and believe that it both instills values independent of those derived from other aspects of college life and enhances particular skills and their overall college experience. They also believed that the trade-offs they make in order to compete were acceptable. This generally positive assessment also held true for different cohorts of student-athletes (i.e. male/female; African-American/white; athletically more successful/athletically less successful; team sports/individual sports). Based on these findings, it appears that those who believe that Division IA student-athletes are receiving an inferior overall college education

experience need to re-assess their conclusions, or at least to consider how the student-athletes themselves evaluate that experience.

Participating in an intercollegiate sport can add an unexpectedly complex layer to a student's life. It is critical when trying to reveal student-athlete experiences to recognize how they are shaped by the relationship between the student-athlete and the educational institution. In Harry M. Cross' article "The College Athlete and the Institution," he presents the argument that the present atmosphere of intercollegiate athletics needs to be reexamined so that college sports programs are more supportive of educational goals. The article coined the phrase "athletes as employees," which supports critics' notions that student-athletes academic interests are being perverted by institutions. He concludes that intercollegiate athletics, in order to assume their true place in education, must be given consideration in terms of their educational contributions to the individual participant. He stresses that this consideration must involve more than the obligations of enforcing the principles of the NCAA. He believes that if intercollegiate athletics are to be recognized as part of the educational program, they must receive their direction from educational purpose, thus making them more supportive of educational goals. This knowledge is beneficial for my study because there could be some implications for what model of collegiate athletics is more conducive to learning for student-athletes (Cross, 1973).

Predicting the academic performance of college athletes has been a topic of interests in the literature. Of particular importance to college administrators is the rate at which college athletes graduate and make progress toward degree completion, as well as identifying what factors are related to and predict academic performance. In Joy L.

Gaston-Gayles study, she used the SAMSAQ (Student Athlete's Motivation toward Sports and Academics Questionnaire) to measure academic and athletic motivation for student-athletes using an expectancy-value theoretical framework. Her results supported the use of this framework and added to the literature concerning the use of other motivational theories that have been previously studied. Her implications included the many different ways in which student affairs administrators, particularly academic advisors, can help student-athletes increase their level of academic motivation. Although my research methods are not focused on unveiling the factors that contribute to academic disinterest, I will use the SAMSAQ as a guide for my interview questions to gain insight on the academic interest levels of participants (Gayles, 2005).

Many observers of the educational scene have been taken back by the degree to which athletes at Ivy League universities and highly selective liberal arts colleges have underperformed academically, on the basis of their academic credentials for admittance. In Reclaiming the Game: College Sports and Educational Values, William G. Bowen and Sarah A. Levin discuss suspicions concerning that the specialization in athletics, more intensive recruitments, and growing pressures to compete successfully, were taking a toll on the academic performance of athletes relative to that of their classmates. They were able to distinguish between recruited and non-recruited (walk-on) athletes which led to their finding that recruited athletes as a group do appreciably less well academically than their classmates. They found that recruited athletes on many of these campuses differ markedly from their classmates in the uses they make of their academic opportunities (Bowen & Levin, 2003). This finding is important to my study because I believe that my

findings have the potential to add to the literature regarding the difference in educational perceptions of recruited and non- recruited Division I and Division III student-athletes.

In recent years, the relationship between the athletic participation and academic performance of college athletes has become a topic of scholarly concern. Peter and Patricia Adler sought to address this topic in their participant-observational study of a men's Division I basketball program. They examined the relationship between athletic participation and academic performance among athletes involved in “big time” college sports. They found that participant’s athletic, social and classroom experiences lead them to become progressively detached from their academic obligations. They concluded that the structure of universities with “big-time” athletic programs and the athletes’ patterned experiences within these universities undermine their attainment of the professional goals of the educational system.

All of the current literature to date about student-athletes focuses on the relationship between athletic participation and academic achievement. My study is an attempt to create new knowledge about student-athletes that compete at different levels of competition, particularly whether the level of competition has any impact on their perceptions about their education.

Methodology

My research focuses on a comparative study between student-athletes at one Division I and one Division III institution. The participants’ names will remain anonymous to protect confidentiality. I am also concealing school names, so I will be referring to the Division I institution as School A and the Division III institution as

School B. The schools that participated in my study were chosen mainly because of their proximity to each other, but there are also some fundamental characteristics that they share that make them good for a comparative study. Both institutions are private, non-sectarian, co-educational institutions that are located in urban settings in the Northeast region of the U.S (www.collegedata.com).

My research project is a small case study of one Division I school and one Division III school. The purpose of my study was to determine if the educational perceptions of student-athletes at Division I and Division III schools differ (I define educational perceptions as the athletic, academic and social experiences and how they help later in life). To explore these educational perceptions, I conducted 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with coaches and upperclassmen baseball players, all of which were single sport athletes. The potential candidates were all contacted via email and those who were interested in the study willingly volunteered to participate. The interview guides were structured using open-ended questions to provoke rich responses from participants. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed and kept for my personal records.

Findings

The NCAA requires satisfactory progress toward a degree to be eligible to participate in intercollegiate athletics. For the participants in my study, this would require 40% of their degree completed (48 hours), 18 credits earned during the academic year, 6 credits per term, a G.P.A greater than or equal to a 1.9, and the declaration of a degree program (www.ncaa.org). Although both Division I and Division III baseball

players expressed that they planned to graduate from their respective colleges, there was a significant difference in the level of academic success each intended to achieve. The Division III student-athletes viewed their academics as important in itself. They spoke about the good relationships they have with their professors and the classes they are excelling in as being important to their college experience. One Division III baseball player stated, “I try to keep my G.P.A above a 3.0... It’s always been important for me to have good relationships with my professors and do well in school” (School B, 2). The Division I student-athletes mostly thought about their academics as important to keep them eligible to play baseball. They did not make any indications that they had high academic expectations for themselves. One of the Division I baseball players stated “Coming from high school I didn’t have the best G.P.A, cause I never really tried. To be honest, my goal right now is to stay eligible, above a 2.0” (School A, 3). Another Division I baseball player stated, “I’ve been eligible for the last four years so I guess I can say that I’m having a good educational experience” (School A, 4). These were typical responses of participants from School A. The Division III baseball players set higher academic standards for themselves and expressed more interest in their academic performance than did the Division I baseball players.

I also asked all of the participants if they viewed themselves as a “student-athlete” or an “athletic student.” For my study I defined a student-athlete as being academically and athletically balanced and an athletic student as spending more time with athletic-related activities. Several of the baseball players at the Division I school viewed themselves as “athletic students” because they felt they spent most of their time doing

athletic related activities. This belief is a misconception because the actual athletic time commitment of baseball players at both institutions was largely similar.

The actual time commitment of baseball players at both institutions was largely similar, although their attitudes differed regarding the place of athletics in their lives. All of the baseball players interviewed made some reference to the time commitment they make to their sport. Participants from School A and School B both expressed similar experiences regarding in-season time commitments, such as extended traveling for away games, playing multiple games during the week and playing double headers on weekends. However, there was a clear difference between the Division I and the Division III baseball players' concept of time and how it affected their educational experiences during their off-seasons.

The Division III baseball players made time for other activities (i.e. community service events, lectures, study sessions) during their off seasons. One Division III baseball player said, "We don't get reprimanded for not making it to an off-season workout. Our coach understands that we have other commitments. He encourages us to get involved and do other things besides baseball" (School B, 6). Contrary to the experiences of the Division III participants, the Division I baseball players expressed the importance of sport being their main priority and they showed little or no interest in extracurricular activities. One Division I baseball player stated, "The players and coaches have set pretty high expectations for our program. Our team is real competitive. We know if we miss a workout were hurting ourselves and our team... We know that it is gonna take 100% commitment to reach our goals" (School A, 2). The main difference in

my data was that Division III baseball players made time for other activities while Division I baseball players expressed the importance of sport being their main priority.

There was a general consensus that given the opportunity, baseball players at both institutions would like to play professionally, but Division III baseball players were more realistic in the chances than the Division I baseball players. Only about 10 % of college baseball players go on to play at the professional level (www.ncaa.org). Although a majority of those professionals are coming from Division I schools, student-athletes still have to be responsible in making sure they get a quality education. There is certainly no guarantee that a professional athlete will have a prolonged career. There is always the chance of suffering a career-ending injury or getting cut from the team. I specifically asked the participants if they had any desire to play baseball professionally and while all the players did desire so, the Division I baseball players said “yes” unequivocally, whereas Division III baseball players tended to put more caveats in their responses. The Division III baseball players’ comments suggest that they have made conscious efforts to think about their future without baseball. One Division III baseball player stated, “Definitely. It would be awesome (to play professionally). I just don’t put all of my expectations there because I know my chances are slim. So getting a good education is my next best option” (School B, 4). The Division I baseball players’ comments suggest that either they believed they have a good chance to play baseball professionally or that they have not given much thought about life without baseball. A typical response from the Division I baseball players was, “Of course. Playing professional baseball has always been a dream of mine” (School A, 2).

The difference in the Division I baseball players' and the Division III baseball players' responses about their aspirations to play professionally, correlates with their interest in extracurricular activities. The Division I baseball players who mentioned that playing professional baseball was their main goal also expressed that they did not have any interest in participating in any other activities besides playing baseball. The Division III baseball players that stated they participated in school activities in addition to playing baseball expressed that they had a desire to play professionally, but that they felt they could rely on their education as an alternative.

The idea of being prepared for life after graduation was a commonly discussed topic amongst all of the interviews. Although players from both institutions believed that they are prepared for life after graduation, there was variation in what experiences they believe will help prepare them for what they have coined the "real world." The Division I baseball players emphasized that their participation on an athletic team is the main reason why they are prepared for life after they graduate. One of the Division I baseball players is quoted, "Like I said before, I think I just had a regular education. Hopefully it will get me a job someday. I think balancing sports and school is bigger than what you would learn in any class anyway" (School A, 7). The Division III baseball players also believed that their participation on an athletic team will help them in the "real world" but they also emphasized the value of their overall college experiences and how that will help them make the transition to life after graduation. One Division III baseball player stated, "I'm not just learning book smarts, I've benefited athletically, socially and academically" (School B, 3). Another player said, "My education here has been priceless and that's

because of academics and sports. I've learned that if I wanna get my work done and learn, then I have to do it. I feel that I am better prepared for the real world now and I have grown a lot from my experiences [in college]" (School B, 1). Based on the responses of the participants, both the Division I and the Division III baseball players are confident that they are prepared for the "real world" but the Division III baseball players communicated much more diversely the reasons for their preparedness.

Discussion

My research was just a small case study of a Division I school and a Division III school so there is some limitations worth noting. My research design is could be viewed as problematic because I did not interview my participants in the same neutral setting. My participants from School A were interviewed in a dugout during an afternoon workout and my participants from School B were interviewed in a more private and studious setting. Thus, the setting of the interviews may have had an impact on the participants' responses. Schools within both Divisions vary in type, size, enrollment, religious affiliation, etc, so my findings may not be consistent for all Division I and Division III athletes. My sample size could be viewed as a limitation in my findings because I only interviewed seven participants from each school. My study also only included male participants from one intercollegiate sport. This can be viewed as a limitation because there are both male and female student-athletes and athletes in different sports may have different experiences.

I have drawn some significant conclusion based on my findings. First, student-athletes' educational perceptions develop prior to college. It seems reasonable to believe that there are simply two different kinds of student-athletes that go to either a Division I or a Division III school. The only way to confirm this notion is to do a longitudinal study and see if perceptions changed over time, but time restrictions prevented me from doing that kind of study. My data does support the notion that by their junior year these are two different types of student-athletes.

I have also concluded that institutions and coaches are not influencing student-athletes' educational perceptions. My data supports that there is nothing about the institution that makes student-athletes care more or less about their education. Both coaches had the same educational expectations for their athletes and players from both institutions expressed the availability of similar educational opportunities at their schools as well as athletic and academic expectations.

My last conclusion is that Division III student-athletes are more balanced and are getting a more well-rounded education than Division I athletes. This conclusion is not based on the quality of the classes or professors at each institution, because my research did not measure that. My data supports that Division III athletes care more about their education. This was made evident in the depth and breadth in which players spoke about it during the interviews. They view it as part of their student-athlete identity.

My study suggests that further research is needed about the educational perceptions of Division I and Division III student-athletes. My project was a small case study of one Division I and one Division III school, thus, I wonder if my findings are just

specific to the two institutions in my study or if this trend is true for all Division I and Division III schools. Since all of my participants were upperclassmen, it would be interesting to see if first and second year student-athletes have these same views, or do the educational perceptions of a student-athlete change over time? This type of study would require a longitudinal research methods approach. Since I did not have any non-baseball or female participants, I am curious if these patterns would be true for them also.

The implications for my study are focused towards student-athletes that want to participate at the Division I level. Student-athletes choose what college they want to attend and they come in with all other experiences that they bring with them. My data supports that students who choose to attend Division I institutions have different attitudes about the importance of their education than students who choose to attend Division III institutions. There are no implications for the school because the school is just playing out what the students expect from the institution. Since neither coaches nor institutions are influencing these perceptions, I would suggest that some intervention be directed toward prospective Division I student-athletes prior to college. Parents and students need to be fully informed and more aware of this trend because it could possibly influence their decision to play a sport or attend a certain school. Prospective Division I student-athletes need more academic and career counseling prior to college so that they can develop more realistic career goals and have higher academic aspirations.

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Appendix A: Student Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your decision to come to this school. (What were some of the factors? What were your expectations?)
2. What are your ambitions, with respect to baseball, after you leave college?
3. Tell me about how you balance who you are as a student and who you are as an athlete?
4. Tell me about your educational experiences. Have you set academic goals for yourself? If so, have they been influenced by your athletic involvement?
5. How do you believe that your academic performance has been affected by athletic related activities?
6. Do you believe that you are having a well-rounded college experience? (Has your participation in athletics prevented you from getting involved with campus activities and organizations?)
7. What do you believe it takes to be a good student? What do you believe it takes to be a good athlete?
8. Has this university provided you the academic, advising, and other non-financial assistance to help you succeed academically? If so, have you used these tools?
9. Describe your relationships with your professors. (Do you feel that some of your professors discriminate or favor you because you are an athlete?)
10. Reflecting on your college education thus far, how do you feel about the overall education you have received? Do you believe that your overall education is preparing you well for life after graduation?

Appendix B: Coaches Questions

1. Explain the athletic and academic expectations you have for your players? Are these expectations different for upperclassmen?
2. Do you believe that your player's academic performance is affected by their athletic related activities? If so, how? (Negatively? Positively?)
3. Do you believe that your players are getting a well-rounded college experience? (Athletic, social, academic, etc...)
4. What do you believe it takes to be a good student? What do you believe it takes to be a good athlete?
5. In your opinion, what is the role of athletics in education?