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ARTICLE

# The Economic Model of Intercollegiate Athletics and Its Effects on the College Athlete Educational Experience

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The financial growth and popularity of intercollegiate athletics presents unique and challenging opportunities to institutions of higher education. Intercollegiate athletics, specifically men's basketball and football, elicit considerable media attention and publicity for these institutions. Yet, the current economic model of intercollegiate athletics engenders challenges to the academic welfare of athletes in both revenue and nonrevenue sports. This paper examines the challenges athletes incur as a result of the current economic model of intercollegiate athletics, and it poses several thought provoking questions to continue the debate on athletic reform.

These represent tumultuous times in intercollegiate athletics: complaints about concussions in intercollegiate athletics are increasing; lawsuits are being levied against the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in regards to the "misuse" or exploitation of athletes' likeness in video games; and several prominent programs, including Penn State and University of North Carolina, are involved in scandal. Despite these ills, intercollegiate athletics top tier programs are becoming increasingly profitable. The NCAA made a profit of \$860 million in the 2012 fiscal year (Berkowitz, 2012) and athletic conferences made a total of \$180 million from the recent bowl games, with no conference losing money (Mandel, 2013). Aggregately, this is very good financial success within intercollegiate athletics. Unfortunately, the economic prosperity of a few elite athletic departments overshadows the financial shortcomings of many of the athletic departments that are operating at a deficit or merely breaking even each year: schools absorbed \$21 million worth of unsold tickets for the bowl games in 2011–12 (Schrotenboer, 2012), and only 23 (all at the Division I level) out of approximately 1,100 NCAA institutions generated more revenue than overall athletic expenses in fiscal year 2011 (Brown, 2012; NCAA, 2012a). That means only about 2.1% of intercollegiate

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athletic programs made money. From a straight business perspective, intercollegiate athletics is a losing venture.

The precedence that is being set by a few prospering conferences and institutions is placing unknown demands on other institutions that are residing in the shadows and striving to compete in the *athletic arms race*. Spending in the six power conferences is 6–12 times more for each athlete compared with each student at these universities, with these schools spending at least \$100,000 for each athlete (Desrochers, 2013). Furthermore, the contracts for midweek televised intercollegiate athletics events impact all students on campus via closed parking lots, limited accessibility to campus, and giving priority to alumni/boosters over the daily paying students. In addition, the academic performance of nonathletes has been negatively impacted by the success of the football team as male students decreased studying, and increased partying and alcohol consumption in response to football success (Lindo, Swensen, & Waddell, 2012). This is important to note that the financial model of intercollegiate athletics impacts all students on campus and their educational opportunities and performance, not just the academic welfare of college athletes. What is also eclipsed in the economic prosperity of these elite programs and the athletic arms race is the athletic labor force responsible for the growth and expansion of these athletic enterprises, and the impact incurred to their academic performance.

## Black Male Bodies and Intercollegiate Athletics

It should be no surprise to conclude that the presence and predominance of the Black male body at predominantly White universities has drastically morphed in the past 30 years. When one currently examines the racial demographics of the top 25 basketball and football teams at these institutions of higher learning, it is easy to forget the efforts of racist segregationist and Southern conservatives who either out-right refused to allow, or made it difficult, for Blacks to attend these institutions. Now we are witnessing a form of racial progress, where Black males also make-up the majority of the athletic labor force for this multimillion dollar enterprise, and they are given access to enormous athletic and educational resources.

The fact that Black male athletes are critical to the cost-effectiveness of the collegiate athletic enterprise is missing in the conversation. To expound, the NCAA's public service announcement informs us that "There are over 400,000 student athletes and just about every one of them will go pro in something other than sports" (NCAA, n.d.). Yet what is camouflaged in this message is that less than 1% of the 400,000 athletes generate more than 90% of the NCAA revenue; and, over 60% of this 1% are African American male basketball players (Hawkins, 2013). Similarly, the revenue enjoyed by FBS schools that make it to one of the BCS Bowl games, or one of the at-large Bowl games, also employ a significant percentage of Black male athletes. For example, in the 2012 All State BCS National Championship game between LSU and Alabama, Black males athletes represented 71% and 70% of the teams, respectively (Hawkins, 2013). As a matter of fact, of the 10 teams competing in the five BCS Bowls in 2012, 55% of the athletes were Black. In addition, the 2013 BCS National Championship game between Alabama and Notre Dame saw somewhat different percentages due to the presence of Notre Dame, where the percentages of Black athletes for Alabama dropped to 59% and

for Notre Dame a mere 33%. However, the depth charts of these two teams tell a unique story where Black males make-up 67% of Alabama's offensive starters and 90% of its defensive starters; whereas Black males make-up 27% of Notre Dame's offensive starters and 55% of its defensive starters. Therefore, when you unpack the depth charts of many of these elite programs, it further elucidates the truths that are escaping a lot of the conversations on athletic reform and financial inequality: Black athletic talent is a necessity to this enterprise's survival, and furthermore, Black male athletes are being recruited to play.

It was stated earlier that the presence of Black males at these institutions is a form of racial progress, but "racial progress" should be used cautiously, because the presence of Black male athletes performing at these universities, although progressive, reinforces racial ideologies and historical practices where the Black body, once again is being used as a critical mode of production for capitalist gain. We seem to suffer from selective amnesia and somehow distance ourselves mentally from the fact that for over 250 years, the Black body was used as the mode of production to till, plant, and harvest several of this nation's staple crops, such as cotton, rice, indigo, tobacco, and sugar. As an economic system, the buying and selling of slaves and slave labor were critical commodities for the foundation of industrialization and capitalist expansion in Europe and the U.S. (see Davis, 2006; Fogel & Engerman, 1974; Ransom & Sutch, 2001; Rediker, 2007; Williams, 1994). As a sociopsychological system, slavery created a certain ideology and an expectation about the structural position of the Black body. Thus, from the institution of slavery, the system of sharecropping, the era of low paid factory workers, the period of Parchman farms that imprisoned the Black males for profit<sup>1</sup>, and now during the era of the athletic arms race, the Black body has been, and continues to be, normalized and institutionalized as a physical commodity for labor. Within the current economic model of the collegiate sport enterprise, Black males' athletic labor, specifically, is converted into entertainment capital, which, again, is critical to the economic viability of this enterprise.

## **Academic Welfare of College Athletes**

With its marriage to sport, many institutions of higher education have created athletic enterprises that function within the physical structure of the university, but they are ideologically and philosophically separate from the university. This union between athletics and the academy has been quite lucrative for some, where some institutions' athletic departments enjoy multimillion dollar surpluses, as discussed earlier. However and to provide a specific example, the University of Georgia athletic department is enjoying a \$68 million surplus largely due to the success of its football team that is predominately Black (67%), which also saw a profit of \$52 million last year and will probably witness record numbers again this year. Thus, this marriage is not only profiting the coffers of external stakeholders, such as media corporations, and other corporate entities, but within the university, many nonrevenue sports enjoy welfare benefits from the revenue sharing policies implemented within athletic departments. Thus, it is important to emphasize that it is not only the athletic demand placed on these athletes who generate the majority of the athletic revenue, but the academic performance and expectation they incur.

Therefore, the mission of the academy and the marriage between academics and athletics are compromised, and it is quite likely the academic welfare of college athletes is also compromised.

Academic programs for advising and support exist within athletic departments across the country. It is probably safe to say that all Division I schools have some sort of academic support program specifically designed for athletes and that this trend is growing at the Division II and III levels. Some critics have argued that these programs created a cottage industry of learning specialists, tutors, and advisors whose primary goal is to maintain the athletic eligibility of the students (see Wolverson, 2012). We know that college athletes are admitted to colleges with lower academic standards than nonathletes at all levels of the NCAA (Shulman & Bowen, 2002). So, maybe the additional academic support is needed for the athletes but why specifically for athletes? Athletes may have special needs, pressures, and constraints, but how do these differ from the student with multiple part-time jobs, one who is a member of the debate team, or a student who is diagnosed with a learning disability? The NCAA's Fundamental Policy "... is to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body" (NCAA, 2012b, p.1). If these special academic support programs are for athletes only, and if these facilities are located in the athletic spheres on campus—in addition to special exercise facilities, dining halls, and dorms for athletes—then how can we say that athletes are being maintained as an integral part of the student body? Reviewing many university campus maps will show that many of these academic support centers are located on the periphery of campus near athletics and away from the academic heart of the institution. This sends a message from even the first day of a recruiting trip about the priorities and daily focus for college athletes on campus.

It seems plausible to then say that the educational opportunities of college athletes might be more limited due to this all-encompassing athletic life on campus. Indeed, research shows that athletes report less stress about making important decisions about their education than nonathletes (Wilson & Pritchard, 2005), and that 94% of athletes report forgoing a class or laboratory probably due to their constraints of practice or travel (Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). Maybe the athletes receive better academic support from athletics and seek this information from their athletic counselors so they are less stressed about these decisions. Or maybe the athletes are less invested in this academic role and let the academic support programs facilitate their decisions so they can focus more on their sport. We also know that coaches exhibit a tremendous amount of control over athletes both during the season and in the off-season (McCormick & McCormick, 2006) and reinforce athletic accomplishments over academic accomplishments (Marx, Huffmon, & Doyle, 2008). Finally, the NCAA's own research shows that the amount of time dedicated to athletic practice on a weekly basis exceeds the 20-hour NCAA limit (NCAA, 2011). This collective evidence demonstrates that college athletes live in a world that emphasizes athletic success over academic success, thereby placing athletics in a higher priority position than academics. Importantly, this collective evidence speaks about college athletes as a whole and does not differentiate among revenue or nonrevenue sports.

To better illustrate these concerns, here is a true story (from the first author) about advising athletes at a Division I university.

I worked as an academic advisor in an academic department at a large, state, Division I university. I assisted with athletes in that department for advising and registration during summer orientation. I remember one summer I received a file about my new student and looked it over quickly to prepare for advising – she was an honors student and also was on either the gymnastics or swimming team (I do not recall which one), so I mentally checked the practice schedule. When we met, she told me that she was interested in being pre-med and majoring in science. So, with these issues in mind – honors which means special classes, pre-med with labs, and athletics with pre-set practice times – I took a minute to examine how this might all fit together for her. I searched and searched to see how these puzzle pieces would fit together. I looked at her and said that she needed to pick two of the three because they all will not fit together.

This story speaks volumes about the state of intercollegiate athletics and the academic welfare of college athletes. This was a bright, motivated female student who was losing her academic options on the first day of orientation, her first day of college—a student who wanted to succeed both academically and athletically. If the system would not work for this student, then for whom is the system working? Would she have had more, fewer, or the same academic options if she was a member of a revenue sport, or would she have faced more or less pressure with handling the balance of academics and athletics if she was a member of a revenue sport? The assumption is that she would have fewer options and more pressure if she was part of a revenue sport.

One of the major sources of control for college coaches is the athletic scholarship. These one-year renewable (at the discretion of the coach) grants-in-aid are a major stumbling block in the academic welfare of college athletes (see also Oriard, 2012). Scholarships can simply not be renewed due to personality conflicts, poor performance on the field/court, or even injury without regards to the academic standing of the athlete. Thus, the athlete's path to a college education is held in check by a coach and athletic system that prioritizes athletics over academics. As mentioned earlier: "There are over 400,000 student athletes and just about every one of them will go pro in something other than sports" (NCAA, n.d.). How many people cringe when this commercial is shown? If these students are going pro in something other than sports, then their priority in college should be that something and not the sport, but this is not happening. If the NCAA, the athletic departments, the coaches, and the universities are truly concerned about the academic welfare and equal educational opportunities for college athletes, then they should release them from the shackles of the one-year renewable athletic scholarship. Implementing multiyear scholarships, such as the historical four-year scholarships, or scholarships utilizing need-based financial aid would allow the athletes to focus on their academic needs without the possible loss of their scholarship for any reasons the coach deems appropriate.

Last year, the NCAA (2012d) approved multiyear scholarships but the sports media has not reported one single coach in one single sport at one single university offering this academic opportunity to a recruit. Offering a multiyear athletic scholarship would be a dramatic investment in the academic welfare of the athlete and show a sincere interest in the athlete as a student rather than just a cog in the college sports enterprise. Now, maybe it takes a year to implement these new policies and

we should expect these multiyear offers any day now. Or maybe the coaches and athletic departments would fear that they would lose too much control as afforded by the one-year scholarships if they provided multiyear scholarships.

## Educational Opportunities of College Athletes

Can you imagine the physical and mental pressure these 18, 19, and 20-year-old young men and women are under to play at a level that undergirds a multimillion dollar enterprise? Can faculty members really expect a significant portion of these athletes' undivided attention during a game week, especially when it is a nationally televised game that is scheduled against a top ten opponent coupled with a campus invasion of the ESPN College Game Day crew? Consequently, what about the physical strain and brain drain that occurs during conference championships week, the Bowl Games season, and the illustrious and lucrative March Madness? Undoubtedly, the quality of these athletes' educational and overall college experience will be negatively impacted. College athletes live in an athletically-focused world: special academic advisors, tremendous pressure from coaches, prioritizing athletics over academics. The athletic practice and travel schedules also decrease educational opportunities for college athletes by simply restricting their available times for courses.

It is possible that athletes are simply not as invested in academics or feel pressure to hide academic interests compared with nonathletes. Recent research in psychology and sport studies examined this possibility as it relates to social identity and stereotype threat for athletes in the college classroom. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that we all have multiple social identities (e.g., husband, father, uncle, son, coworker, professor, athlete), and we may emphasize one identity, or our membership in a particular group, at one time or another as a means of boosting our self-worth and sense of belonging. The sometimes conflicting identities or roles of being an athlete and a student may be difficult to manage for athletes in college. Athletes might be threatened by the dumb jock stereotype, and this may help to explain decreased performance by athletes in the classroom (Harrison et al., 2009)—the fear of living up to the stereotype takes the focus away from the academic issue which minimizes performance. In addition, athletes invest in this athletic identity early in their college careers and then adopt the student identity later in their college careers (Chen, Snyder, & Magner, 2010; Lally & Kerr, 2005).

Research on clustering—when 25% or more of the members of one team share a single academic major (Case, Greer, & Brown, 1987)—shows that this happens in the major conferences in the Football Bowl Subdivision (Fountain & Finley, 2010) and in 45% of the Division I women's basketball teams (Paule, 2010). In the football study, it was noted that some programs even exhibit “super clustering” (greater than 50%) and “mega clustering” (greater than 75%) for the minority football players. Athletes enrolling in large percentages in certain majors is not an issue as long as they are choosing the majors based on their interests or career goals, and that these majors are academically rigorous. However, athletes are selecting majors that do not match their academic interests or career goals (Otto, 2012). Taken collectively, this information about clustering appears to demonstrate that college athletes are following a narrower academic path of opportunity due to

inherent restrictions in their scheduling, limited academic interests, or, worst case scenario, simply selecting majors that appear easy and help maintain eligibility but provide limited preparation and skills for postgraduation. Following in this worst case scenario, more recent research shows that the flow of athletes into and out of a major changes based on the rigor of the requirements: as a major become more rigorous, fewer athletes enroll in this major and more athletes transfer out of this major to another, ideally less rigorous, major (Fountain & Finley, 2011).

When you factor in the different levels of academic preparation many of these athletes bring to universities, the academic rigor of these universities, and their slow adoption of the student role, their educational experiences will be vastly different from peers, and their educational achievement in the form of graduation will be impacted negatively. According to numerous measures (e.g., Academic Progress Rate, Federal Graduation Rate [FGR], Graduation Success Rate [GSR]) athletes are doing better academically in recent years and better than nonathletes. However, these comparisons of athletes and nonathletes are flawed. By default athletes must be full-time students, but this is not true for nonathletes. This difference is not factored in the calculations for the FGR or GSR. Reports continue to show that athletes in football, men's and women's basketball, baseball, and softball graduate at lower rates compared with full-time nonathletes at their institutions (Nagel, 2013; Southall, 2012a, 2012b). This is even more of a concern for the Black male athletes who financially drive the college sports enterprise, as they are graduating at rates 10–20 percentage points lower than White male athletes. These rates are not because they are incapable of excelling academically, but in part, it is also due to the athletic demands placed on them to perform at an elite level each week, each month, and each year for the sake of supplementing multimillion-dollar budgets. So, athletes have special academic support services and are clustered together in certain majors but are still graduating at a lower rate compared with nonathletes. Maybe we need to get athletes to invest in their student role earlier in their college career, or maybe we need to allow them more time to dedicate to this something other than sports.

## Conclusion

Why should the financial burden of intercollegiate athletic corporations rest primarily on the backs of Black male athletes? Is this athletic welfare system fair, economically feasible, or economically sustainable? When the late Dr. Myles Brand proclaimed that “amateurism defines the participant, not the enterprise” (Brand, 2006), did we not hear the contradiction uttered in this philosophical stance: the contradiction of having a system that is capitalist in accumulation and egalitarian in distribution? How are the financial conditions we are witnessing in intercollegiate athletics reflective of larger corporate and governmental conditions, where the problem is not generating revenue, but spending and the direction of spending? These questions are a few of the concerns regarding the burden that the financial demands are placing on the academic performance of revenue generating athletes. Since the Black males' athletic labor is essential to this enterprise, measures are necessary to improve their welfare as students, their collegiate experience, and their academic achievement. At the same time, the inherent educational restrictions occur for all college athletes, not just those in revenue sports.

During the press conference about the sanctions at Penn State, NCAA leaders stated that “every major college and university needs to do a gut-check and ask where are we on the appropriate balance between the culture in athletics and the broader culture of the university and make certain that they’ve got the balance right” (NCAA, 2012c). What is the proper balance of academics and athletics on our college campuses? Would allowing multiyear athletic scholarships show a proper balance? Would scheduling practices very early in the day or late at night show a proper balance? Would strictly adhering to the NCAA’s playing and practice hour regulations show a proper balance? Would making athletes receive the same academic advising and programs as nonathletes show the proper balance? Let’s hope these would all be initial steps for true academic reform in college sports and increasing both the academic welfare and educational opportunities for college athletes.

## Note

1. See the following works for information on parchment farms: Oshinsky, D. M. (1996). *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press; and Blackmon, D. A. (2008). *Slavery by another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Doubleday Books.

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