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The Forgotten Kids: Experiences of Potential Student-Athletes at a Postsecondary Football Preparatory School

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The first preparatory institution was founded in 1635 to prepare elite men for public service, a role in the church, or admission to Harvard (Boyer, 1983). Nearly 400 years later, the objective of such institutions is no longer Harvard, but often an avenue for potential student-athletes (PSAs) to participate in intercollegiate sport (Thamel, 2007). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) does not define nor regulate postgraduate preparatory institutions (NCAA, 2018); however, Curran (2014) describes a preparatory institution (prep schools) as a postgraduate institute that provides PSAs another year at a secondary institution prior to making the transition to college. Utilizing semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups, and framed by Mincer's (1958) Model of Basic Human Capital, the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of those attending (PSAs) or associated with (e.g., coaches, teachers, parents, administrators) one specific postsecondary preparatory institution (Academy X).

Introduction

The goal for many athletes is to continue their athletic endeavor by competing at the intercollegiate level and earning an athletic scholarship. More than 1,083,000 high

school students participate in the sport of football, and 6.8% of those participants will go on to compete at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institution (NCAA, 2017). However, only 2.6% of high school football

interscholastic athletics will participate at the NCAA (2017) Division I level. Not only does athletic ability play a factor in student-athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics, but also in order to become a NCAA qualifier eligible for practice, competition and financial aid, prospective student-athletes must meet NCAA (2018) initial eligibility requirements.

For the purpose of this paper, a Potential Student-Athlete (PSA) is a student who desires to attend a college or university and participate in a varsity sport. In order for a PSA to be deemed a qualifier at the NCAA Division I level, the PSA must graduate from high school and have completed a minimum of 16 core courses with at least a 2.3 grade point average (NCAA, 2018). Of the 16 core courses PSAs are required to complete, 10 of those classes, including seven in English, math or natural/physical science, must be completed prior to the PSA's seventh semester in high school (NCAA, 2018). However, it is important to recognize that the NCAA (2018) allows PSAs to take one core course within a year of high school graduation in order to fulfill the core course requirement and assist with the GPA requisite. According to the NCAA (2018) a PSA "may complete the core course at a location other than the high school from which he or she graduated and may initially enroll full time at a collegiate institution at any time after completion of the core course" (p. 168). Lastly, the PSA must earn an SAT combined score or ACT sum score as deemed

by the initial eligibility index, often referred to as the sliding scale (NCAA, 2018). There was no data available regarding the amount of PSAs who failed to meet NCAA initial eligibility standards.

If the PSA fails to meet NCAA initial eligibility requirements, unfortunately, the PSA has limited options. Essentially, a PSA may attend a junior college and earn an associates degree before transferring to a four-year institution, or a PSA has the option to attend a four-year university as an academically imposed redshirt (NCAA, 2018). With both of these options, student-athletes sacrifice athletic eligibility. Due to increasing college admission standards as well as NCAA initial eligibility standards (NCAA, 2018; Wechsler, 2014), some PSAs have selected a lesser-known option, to attend a postgraduate preparatory school upon high school graduation (Nussbaum, 2000). Those who choose this route do so without exhausting any athletic eligibility (Curran, 2014; Diaz, 2015; Lewin, 2000; Thamel, 2006).

According to Lewin (2000) students had various reasons for choosing a postgraduate preparatory school, including "learning better study skills, exploring interests they overlooked in high school, playing another year of sports without using their N.C.A.A. [sic] eligibility, improving their SAT scores, or gaining more distance from a troubled sophomore or junior year" (Lewin, 2000, p. A1). Despite the historical relevance of traditional preparatory institutions (Boyer, 1983), little is known about postsecondary preparatory

schools in regard to utilizing these establishments as an avenue for collegiate sports participation (Yednak, 2016). This study strives to serve as the foundation for research on postgraduate preparatory institutions and athletic participation.

Academy X

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of those attending or associated with Academy X, a 100-year-old postgraduate preparatory institution located in a rural east-coast community. Academy X originally was founded as a feeder school for an Ivy League institution and provides students the opportunity for social mobility through football. This particular institution is viewed as one of the most successful football factories in the country, and has seen tremendous results in assisting its students in transitioning to a NCAA Division I member institution on a football scholarship. According to Academy X's recruiting brochure, graduates have gone on to attend more than 150 colleges and universities around the country, resulting in more than 300 Division I scholarships. Ninety-eight percent of its alumni received a football scholarship to a four-year institution and 66% of students that attended Academy X received a four-year scholarship offer.

Academy X only operates during the fall semester; the cost of attendance is \$25,000. Academy X has 65 male students from 20 different states (60% of the study body is non-white). All students participate in football, and as such

have weights and conditioning in the morning, and practice in the afternoon. On the weekends, the students play football (12 games a season) against junior varsity and community college football teams. Along with the student's football obligations, students may take classes in: Russian History, Psychology, English, Algebra, Anatomy, and Public Speaking. The NCAA has certified the core classes offered at Academy X and as such, students may use a core class taken at Academy X to assist them in fulfilling NCAA (2018) initial eligibility requirements. Academy X also offers a Standardized Test Preparation class to assist PSAs in increasing their standardized test score. According to Academy X's academic advisor, students who have re-taken college entrance exams (e.g., SAT/ACT) upon attending Academy X improved (on average) by four points on the ACT and 200 points on the SAT. As such, the academic curriculum offered to PSAs (e.g., core courses, standardized test preparation) at Academy X can assist students in meeting NCAA initial eligibility standards.

There is lack of literature regarding postsecondary preparatory institutions. Furthermore, there is a shortage of knowledge concerning postsecondary preparatory institutions as an avenue for intercollegiate athletic participation. This study is the first of its kind to examine a postsecondary football preparatory school. To this point, the results of this study will provide better understanding of such preparatory institutions and the PSAs that attend them.

Review of Literature

Following Mincer's (1958) Model of Basic Human Capital, higher education and athletic participation is portrayed as a product by the NCAA and as such a vehicle for social mobility for those participating (Baker & Hawkins, 2016). Human capital refers to assets that may yield income such as experience, innate ability, and education; these assets lead to having greater skills, which results in greater wage attainment and mobility (Goldin, 2014). A change in human capital creates social mobility, specifically intergenerational social mobility, which assists an individual's economic position and overall occupational prominence (Goldin, 2014). Social mobility in the context of collegiate sport relies on high quality education and subsequent employment opportunities as well as lucrative professional sport contracts. Recent literature suggests that the reliance on sport as a vehicle for social mobility results in lower levels of academic achievement and the unreasonable expectation of reaching the professional level (Baker & Hawkins, 2016).

Sport, namely football, has the ability to cross ethnic, class, and racial lines and plays an important role in the culture of education in the United States (Davidson & Moran-Miller, 2005; Gems, 1996). Higher education often is viewed as the vehicle for mobility and overall socio-economic status (Snellman, Silva, Frederick & Putnam 2015). According to the NCAA (2014) those who earn a bachelor's degree earn 65% more than those

with just a high school diploma. As such, a college education provided by an athletic scholarship is a way to attain future earnings (NCAA, 2014). Intercollegiate sport can provide student-athletes with the opportunity to achieve social mobility and economic advantages (Snellman et al., 2015). As not all PSAs meet initial eligibility requirements upon graduating from high school, postsecondary preparatory schools may function in a way that supports the development of human capital by providing these individuals with the resources needed to secure an athletic scholarship. Athletics in higher education has the potential to promote social mobility for those participating (Baker & Hawkins, 2016).

Postgraduate preparatory schools with an athletic focus are viewed as diploma mills whose sole purpose is focusing on sport participation (Thamel, 2006). In fact, the NCAA (2018) does not classify preparatory institutions differently than high schools as they are not considered "collegiate institutions" (p. 160). Preparatory schools offer a post-graduate program that essentially is a fifth year of high school (Curran, 2014; Davidson & Moran-Miller, 2005; Diaz, 2015). This fifth year provides PSAs the opportunity to improve academically in hopes of becoming NCAA qualifiers and being accepted into their college of choice (Diaz, 2015). According to Curran (2014) and Diaz (2015) PSAs are motivated to attend a preparatory school in order to obtain an athletic scholarship, or to acquire a more attractive scholar-

ship offer. Injuries also are reasons PSAs choose to attend a postsecondary preparatory institution (Curran, 2014; Diaz, 2015). As such, the time at a preparatory school could be used to build strength, recover, and show coaches the athlete has the ability to perform (Curran, 2014).

Previous Studies

An extensive search of the literature revealed very few academic studies that have examined postsecondary preparatory institutions. Kuriloff and Reichert's (2003) qualitative study investigated different groups of boys at one prestigious preparatory school known for training boys to perform in academia and instilling in them the habits of success. The researchers found that rather than administration or teachers, dominate social groups determined school culture (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). The dominant social culture at the time of the study was one that encouraged dedication and discipline; such groups believed in the vision and quality of the institution and developed intrinsic motivation for learning (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Researchers concluded that the goal of the school was not talent development but rather instilling in the participants the value of a strong work ethic (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003).

Davidson and Moran-Miller (2005) completed an ethnographic study on the character development in an elite preparatory school's basketball program. The qualitative ethnographic design utilized semi-structured interviews, informal

conversation interviews, observations, and video recordings (Davidson & Moran-Miller 2005). Participants included coaches and players from a preparatory men's basketball program. The study was designed to provide a phenomenological understanding of adolescent character development in a competitive sport program (Davidson & Moran-Miller, 2005). The results of the study suggested sports do not build character on their own, but coaches can help if they have the knowledge, commitment, and skills to challenge players (Davidson & Moran-Miller, 2005).

Little is known about athletically-focused postsecondary preparatory schools. As such, this study strived to fill a major gap in the literature. The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons PSAs attend, and the experiences associated with attending a postsecondary preparatory institution. The following research questions were used to guide the present study:

RQ1: Why do PSAs choose to attend a preparatory institution following high school graduation?

RQ2: What are the experiences of those attending or associated with the postgraduate preparatory institution?

Method

Participants

Upon receiving support from Academy X and IRB approval, the primary researcher traveled to Academy X and spent a week at the school. During that

time, the primary researcher conducted in-person semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups. Data collection took place during the Fall semester (which also was football season). Upon arrival at Academy X, the head coach reviewed the interview protocol and provided the primary researcher with a list of PSAs and Academy X staff members that could participate in semi-structured interviews. In total, 18 individuals participated in semi-structured interviews: 11 PSAs, four coaches (two of which also teach), one teacher, one administrator, and the head coach. Interviews took place in Academy X staff offices and empty classrooms. Interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 105 minutes, with the average interview lasting 32 minutes in length.

Four focus groups took place: three with PSAs and one with parents. The focus groups with PSAs took place in a classroom at Academy X before the students' Anatomy class with an average of 21 PSAs participating in each focus group. The focus groups with the PSAs lasted nine minutes on average (as the primary researcher had to be considerate of time because the focus groups took place prior to a class). One focus group took place with the parents of PSAs. Seven parents participated in the focus group and the focus group lasted 13 minutes. The focus groups with the parents took place at an away football game on the bleachers during half time.

Methods

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were utilized. According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) a semi-structured interview is "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 3). Along with semi-structured interviews, focus groups were employed to allow for group dialogue and varying opinions (Casey & Kreuger, 2000).

With permission of the participants, the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed for meaning (Merriam, 2009). The researchers used open coding (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) and separately reviewed transcripts and reported initial interpretations at each debriefing session (Spall, 1998; Maxwell, 2013). The emergent data was initially coded (meaning units) followed by management of the data (subthemes) and lastly, data reduction or final themes (Thomas, 2006).

Model of Basic Human Capital.

Experience, innate ability, and education are assets with the ability to produce income (Goldin, 2014). The model of basic human capital portrays education and athletic participation as assets with the ability to produce social mobility (Baker & Hawkins, 2016). While reviewing transcripts, the research team explored the desired social mobility of the PSAs and the current social mobility experiences of attending Academy X.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Descriptive validity, peer debriefing, and triangulation were used to ensure the description maintained maximum accuracy (Maxwell, 2013; Spall, 1998). Peer debriefing required the research team, which consisted of five experienced qualitative researchers, to examine the transcripts and attend debriefing sessions on a regular basis (Maxwell, 2013; Spall, 1998). During such sessions, the research team challenged one another through constructive dialogue and feedback (Spall, 1998). Triangulation was established through the multitude of data collection, triangulation of perspective, analytical theoretical triangulation, and extensive discussions held by the research team (Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation of perspective was established by speaking with PSAs, coaches, parents, administrators, and teachers (Maxwell, 2013). Analytical theoretical triangulation involved understanding the back and forth between theory and data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016).

Results and Findings

The first research question explored a potential student-athlete's choice to attend a preparatory institution. The data revealed three final themes: (1) eligibility concerns, (2) athletic exposure and development, and (3) academic improvement. Focus groups with PSAs as well as semi-structured interviews with coaches and PSAs contributed to answering why these young men chose to attend a preparatory institution following their high

school graduation. As mentioned previously, the NCAA requires PSAs to meet a certain set of requirements to be eligible to compete at the intercollegiate level. Though the misconceptions of motivations for attending preparatory institutions are mainly focused on non-qualifiers, we found that some PSAs attended Academy X for other reasons. The PSAs consisted of those who were qualifiers, non-qualifiers, "borderline qualifiers," and late qualifiers.

Eligibility. There were several sources in which these individuals were informed of the NCAA eligibility standards: guidance counselors, coaches, parents, pamphlets on coaches' doors, and friends. The majority of those non-qualifier, or ineligible, PSAs found out late in their high school career or weren't informed in a way that was beneficial for their future. For example, one PSA claimed, "No one really told me that I needed to get like really good grades. Especially at the school I went to. It was a private school and pretty tough...it was hard on me academically." Another PSA said, "I never really knew specific rules I just knew I needed good scores." An additional PSA claimed, "My parents found out about it, none of my coaches told me about it."

The timeline of learning about NCAA eligibility standards ranged from sophomore to senior year in high school and in an extreme case, not until attending Academy X. A PSA who had four different coaches throughout his high school football career claimed, "I didn't

really know much about the NCAA eligibility center until late into my senior year.” An additional PSA stated, “If I was told beforehand, I think I would have aimed for that GPA and aimed for that SAT.”

Academy X proved valuable for many PSAs who may not have been informed of the eligibility requirements of the NCAA before graduation. It provided many of these young men a second chance at their dream. Furthermore, the academic rigor of Academy X played an integral part in the school’s ability to produce NCAA qualifying student-athletes.

Athletic exposure and development. In addition to eligibility requirements, PSAs attended Academy X for an opportunity to earn a scholarship and play football at the Division I level. This was a common goal among most of the PSAs but more interestingly, the coaches’ main goal. For example, a PSA said, “I just like everyone here we have a common goal...playing football at the Division I level and getting a football scholarship.” This common goal was among qualifiers and non-qualifiers alike. One struggling PSA even commented that no matter what happened, leaving Academy X with a scholarship was his ultimate goal.

Some PSAs attend Academy X for further skill development and exposure. An NCAA qualifying PSA claimed, “I just need exposure. That’s all I need...I just had some looks but no offers [in high school].” Another PSA, who appreciated the physical and skill development

he’d experienced at Academy X stated, “I didn’t really get the looks I wanted out of high school. My coach just doesn’t want kids to leave the state. And nobody really gets recruited out of Minnesota. It’s kind of a dead zone.”

One of the main findings of this study was that Academy X provided students with a second chance or an opportunity to participate in collegiate sport. Many of the PSAs were cognizant of the resources (e.g., time and money) required to attend Academy X. However, the participants felt that Academy X would assist them in achieving their goals simply due to the connections the coaching staff had in the collegiate football community. Such sentiments were reflected in the comment made by one PSA, who felt the head coach at Academy X coach had connections that might not otherwise have been available to him. “He knows people who are very powerful and coaches and teachers and all of that and he can get me in touch if I can do what I can do here.”

Another PSA explained:

I would not be going to a university right now out of high school. I would be at some junior college, hating my life and not really doing anything. I would lose motivation for school and football. Coming here kind of made me realize what I have to do to play college football.

When asked about what Academy X meant to him, a PSA simply responded: “the opportunity to still live.” The head

coach put the experience into perspective when he said, “The kids we help are probably the forgotten kids, the kids that would be lost without us.”

PSAs were grateful for the opportunity to continue to develop their athletic abilities post high-school graduation. Academy X provided a unique opportunity for PSAs to continue to play the sport they love and also make connections. PSAs reported that the athletic exposure and development they received there did in fact pay high dividends, regardless of the cost.

Academic improvement. In addition to eligibility and athletic exposure and development, PSAs attended Academy X for academic improvement. The non-qualifying PSAs ranged in reasons of ineligibility; some lacked GPA, some test scores, some core courses, and some a combination of two or three. One PSA had more than 30 full scholarship offers to Division I football programs (the majority in Power 5 conferences) but lacked the GPA for admission and “had to get my grades up before college.” Another PSA was a combination of ineligibilities, needing both an improved GPA and SAT score. One young man transferred midway through his high school career because he needed to get a core history class: “They said it didn’t count towards right before graduation so that kind of messed me up.”

Academic improvement was one of the main reasons for attending Academy X. Whether it was GPA, taking an ab-

sentee core class, or improving standardized test scores, Academy X provided an environment for the improvement of academic résumés. With the help of Academy X, many PSAs found themselves capable of meeting academic requirements for admission into NCAA Division I member institutions, providing them the opportunity to pursue a college education and earn a football scholarship.

Experiences at Academy X

The second research question explored the experiences of those attending a preparatory institution. The PSAs were candid, open, and honest about their frustrations, the environment in which they resided, and the benefits of such a unique experience. Focus groups with PSAs and parents as well as semi-structured interviews with coaches, teachers, administrators, and PSAs resulted in three sub-themes (focus and preparation, melting pot, and survival) describing the overall experience at Academy X.

Focus and preparation. Interviews revealed further refinement of this sub-theme that included environment, lifestyle, maturity, and goals. These worked together to contribute to the focus and preparation of the PSAs.

Environment. As stated in the introduction, Academy X is in an extremely rural location that is geographically isolated in regard to its proximity to large cities and entertainment. The PSAs, administrators, coaches, and parents all commented on the tough environment

with no distractions. For example, one PSA described the school environment this way:

I'm more focused you know. There's nothing but boys here. No girls to distract me. I feel like I'm focused a lot more because after practice I usually get done with my homework after I eat. It's better for me. I'm learning how to take notes more better [sic]. And how to write better papers and stuff.

Recognizing the importance of such an experience and learning to embrace Academy X's tough environment, another PSA commented that although it took him a while to get used to the restrictions, he knew it contributed to the school's tradition of producing excellence.

The lone administrator even chimed in on the importance of the location, saying that the lack of young female presence and geographic isolation made a relatively good environment for "focusing absolutely on academics and athletics." They added, "I want the students to realize that there's no distractions, and if they're okay with that, then this is exactly where they should be."

Lifestyle. The lifestyle of Academy X is set up to mimic life within higher education and competing in football at a Division I level of play. PSAs acknowledged that their academics were a preview of college life. Their English teacher agreed, noting that the school's main focus is to get students ready for

college: "Almost everything that we do... also transfers to the SAT because the test is designed to kind of indicate college readiness." The PSAs also commented on the preview of college life within the scope of football, proclaiming they feel prepared not only in the classroom, but also on the field: "I don't think anybody in the world conditions as much as we do right now. We run all the time."

One parent commented on the coaches' investment in her son: "I see with my own eyes that they have their best interest at heart... They give them tough love and they also care for them as their children," she said. The head coach explains his attempt in building a lifestyle at Academy X to prepare the PSAs for the next level by describing how he tries to mimic college's early wake-up calls, workouts, classwork, and practice:

I try to show them the whole what's going to happen when they get there. And I think that's what I've built over 17 years is when a coach takes an [Academy X] kid, he's more mature, more experienced, and he's been tested, and I think that's one of the draws of our kids... I try to make it as hard as I can so when they get there they make it.

Maturity. Academy X is a place in which these young boys, fresh out of high school, mature. A parent commented on his son, "He has matured quite a bit since he's been here; as a brother to his sisters, as a son, and as a person, so I

like that.” One coach commented on the preparation, maturity, and overall experience of attending Academy X:

If a kid is serious about playing college football, it’s a fantastic experience. It’s going to get them really well prepared for the next level. They’re going to mature, the kids actually physically change a lot of them while they’re here. They get bigger and stronger that one year, they play at a much higher level, they’re far more prepared.

The administrator also commented on the students buying into the purpose of Academy X: “Here, perhaps they can show that transition of maturity and growth.”

Goals. The young men also reported having many similar dreams: earning a scholarship, obtaining a college degree, and playing in the National Football League (NFL).

In obtaining a scholarship to play Division I football one PSA stated: “I have dreams—to be a Division I football player.” The idea of obtaining a college degree through playing football motivated this PSA: “I want my athletics to actually help me get a free education. That’s really all I want. I don’t want my mom worrying about me being in debt after college.”

Many of the PSAs surpassed college football goals and had their eyes on playing in the NFL. “Yeah I’d like to go pro,” one PSA explained. “If I do get really good I’ll probably just take my chances

and try to go to the league [NFL].” Simply put one PSA stated, “I want to be an NFL player.”

The coaches emphasized the main goal for attending Academy X:

My coaching philosophy, it’s a little different here because not just winning ... the kids have got to have the academics. Our goal has nothing to do with the NFL, our goal is to get them into college and get them primed up enough when they go that they’re going to graduate and they’re going to make something out of themselves, that’s our goal.

One parent acknowledged the importance of her son being surrounded by others with the same types of goals and their ability to share a mutual focus: “It prepares them a little bit better... They’re all focusing on the same thing, that dream... supporting each other and just staying focused together.”

The isolation, rigor, and challenges of Academy X contributed strongly to the focus and preparation of PSAs. Academy X is very isolated by design. All other distractions are eliminated to encourage focus on the field and in the classroom. PSAs reported going through a maturation process, forging many into responsible student-athletes. Coaches, administrators, and teachers alike work together to prepare PSAs for the next step in their football careers.

Melting pot. A few student-athletes mentioned the diversity of backgrounds

and reasons for attending Academy X. The student body itself represented a diverse range of geographical regions (more than 20 states and 3 countries), socioeconomic status, academic and athletic abilities, and reasons for attending Academy X. For example, one PSA from Minnesota commented on being surrounded by students from different cultures. Others recognized the geographic diversity. Additionally, one student acknowledged academic ability and differing geographic regions:

We have some really smart kids here and I thought that when I came here I thought that it was just going to be myself and a bunch of dumb kids but it's not like that at all. There's some very smart kids here. There's all types of kids here. There's kids from Canada, there was a kid from Brazil, had kids from California, I'm from the islands. We have kids from all over. All types of relative intelligence, all types of different backgrounds. It's like a big melting pot.

Preparatory schools have a unique capability to recruit from all over the world. Many of the PSAs cited that the diversity of the institution was interesting and unexpected, yet appreciated. The diversity PSAs experienced at Academy X is not unlike the diversity they also may experience on a college campus. Whether it was cultural diversity, geographic, or intellectual, the diversity of Academy X appeared to be a beneficial learning experience for the participants.

Survival. Lastly, the PSAs heavily emphasized that Academy X was not for the weak minded or weak bodied. There were references to the experience as challenging and rigorous. It provided the opportunity to “become a man,” and held everyone accountable to a high standard (academically and athletically). A student described Academy X as, “a gateway. I mean to set you up for the next four, the most important four years of your life. It's a gateway to better opportunities. It's hell. It's everything.”

One student-athlete recognized the challenges and benefits of attending Academy X:

I guess this school is just really not for the weak. We were all all-stars in high school and that means nothing anymore. You just have to be a leader and you have to be mentally tough and you have to be physically tough. And sometimes you have to be emotionally tough. Like sometimes this place can take a toll on you. You miss your family, you miss your friends and you have to be able to just push through that and remember why you're here... I guess it's worth it. As long as you put in the hard work and you get your scholarship.

The rigor of the schedule is undeniable, as the coaches set out to mimic the life of a collegiate football player. The PSAs definitely noticed and described their typical day:

The O line and D line wake up around 6:20 and would go work

out at 6:30. And then we have our work out for an hour and a half and then we have breakfast at 8:30 then we can usually get a little sleep right after breakfast until 9:20 when school starts and then first period, second period, third period and all that. And then right after last period...we have about 30 minutes to get ourselves together and then up on the field for 3 o'clock. So I think classes are done at 2:20, we have about a half hour or a little less to get up on the field for 3:15 practice.

Another PSA describes a similar experience:

I wake up, got lifts Monday through Thursday at 7:30. After that shower, eat breakfast, get ready for school. After school go get ready for practice and after that eat dinner. After that you go to do what you got to do. Get your homework done and that's about it. Get ready for the next day.

A mother even commented on the schedule of the student-athletes being "rigorous" but recognizing her son understood the importance of the experience. "He's counting down. But he's doing what he needs to do that he didn't before. You know, a second chance," she said.

Several PSAs gave credit to their experience at Academy X for their growth into "becoming a man." They recognized challenges as teachable moments. "The coaches. They teach us a lot. Like being a

man...they're teaching us how to grow," one PSA said. And another, "I will wait until the last minute to get serious when I like I should just always be serious... That's one thing I'm trying to change around here. This is definitely teaching me how to become a man here."

High expectations also were a commonality among all interviewees, reporting high expectations both in the classroom and on the field. For some, it was a shock coming from high school and for others, it was an opportunity.

You just always have to be on your guard you can't slip up at all. And it's just like a lot of pressure especially for the guys that don't have scholarships. Like you put all this money into it you need to leave for something you can't just go home and be a failure.

And another PSA noted: "They expect the most out of us here. They expect us to go to college and succeed. And they want us to be the best men we can be." One teacher outlined her expectations clearly: "I expect them to be prepared and present. And present, if your body is here, then so is your mind."

Academy X sets very high standards for its PSAs and requires their full attention whether in the classroom or on the field. Many PSAs felt that just surviving such an environment was a test, yet it was evident that many took advantage of the situation and saw it as an opportunity to grow. The grueling demands of their football schedule, academic curricula, and isolation created an environment

for growth and resilience. Preparatory schools, though difficult, can bring out the best in PSAs both mentally and physically via their demanding and arduous nature.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question exploring a PSAs choice to attend a preparatory institution revealed three final themes: (1) eligibility concerns, (2) athletic exposure and development, and (3) academic improvement. The findings in the present study appear to be in line with Lewin's (2000) article describing PSAs various reasons for choosing a postgraduate preparatory school, including "learning better study skills, exploring interests they overlooked in high school, playing another year of sports without using their N.C.A.A. [sic] eligibility, improving their SAT scores, or gaining more distance from a troubled sophomore or junior year" (p. A1). However, it is important to note that "exploring interest they overlooked in high school" (Lewin, 2000, p. A1) did not appear to be a priority for the participants in this study. The PSAs had one goal, one reason for attending Academy X – to earn a college football scholarship.

Similarly, the results also are in agreement with Diaz's (2015) notes on why PSAs go to such institutions. Additional time after high school allows PSAs to focus on their academic endeavors (Diaz, 2015). The participants in this study also spoke to the importance of exposure by attending Academy X in order to earn

a football scholarship. As such, Diaz's (2015) article highlights attending preparatory schools in order to gain the attention of collegiate coaches.

Curran (2014) described a PSAs desire to improve test scores to gain college acceptance or comply with NCAA legislation as motivating factors for attending a preparatory institution. Although this appeared to be true for the majority of those interviewed, it is important to note that some PSAs were qualifiers. However, those PSAs that were qualifiers attended the preparatory school in order to obtain better offers.

The second research question explored the experiences of those attending a preparatory institution. Three themes appeared in the data: (1) focus and preparation, (2) melting pot, and (3) survival. Although every experience is unique and should not be compared, it is important to recognize the similarities between the present study and others.

Kuriloff and Reichert's (2003) qualitative study of 16 boys at an elite school spoke to the expectations of the school and how the boys navigated their environment. Although participants in the present study spoke to feelings of isolation, they explained that it helped them focus on the true reason they were there. Furthermore, they spoke about their teammates and being exposed to individuals who were from different places. The participants definitely had an adjustment period; however, it was clear that they bought into the system. The PSAs and their parents could see the benefits of

this environment and realized that this experience would assist them in reaching their goal. Similarly, the participants in Kuriloff and Reichert's (2003) study spoke about the elite training and academic rigor that assisted them in developing habits of success.

Davidson and Moran-Miller (2005) examined character development in an elite preparatory school's basketball program. The major findings included recruiting the right people and the idea that although character is important, it cannot be taught (Davidson & Moran-Miller, 2005). Participants in the present study explained that the coaches at Academy X challenged them and helped them to grow and develop into men. Such sentiments also were shared by several parents in the focus group. This philosophy of taking care of the students was a constant topic of discussion by the coaches and teachers as well. As the head coach stated, "The kids we help are probably the forgotten kids, the kids that would be lost without us." Similar to the Davidson and Moran-Miller (2005) study, PSAs at Academy X also were challenged by coaches and staff who assisted in the development of the athletes' overall character.

Basic Human Capital and Preparatory Schools. The experiences of the student-athletes revealed that essentially it was the human capital they gained as a result of attending the preparatory school that they hoped would enable them to not only earn an athletic scholarship, but succeed at an NCAA Division I member institution. The experiences of

the participants were directly related to Mincer's (1958) model of basic human capital in that the majority of the PSAs interviewed sought out two forms of capital: knowledge and skills. Whether the PSAs focused on improving standardized test scores, GPA, or meeting the core course requirement, many of the participants sought knowledge. Knowledge not only of an academic nature, but also related to learning, discipline, study skills, and time management. PSAs also sought athletic and academic skills that would enable them to succeed at the next level and earn that all-important scholarship. By developing these two primary forms of human capital, preparatory schools fill an important void in the lives of many PSAs. As expressed above one student stated, Academy X is "a gateway. I mean to set you up for..., the most important four years of your life. It's a gateway to better opportunities." Such institutions have the potential to serve as a powerful vessel to equip these young men with the skills and knowledge necessary to obtain success and ultimately achieve social mobility. However, it is important to be mindful of the fact that the dependency of sport as an avenue for social mobility has been shown to lower academic achievement and creates unobtainable expectations of reaching the professional level (Baker & Hawkins, 2016).

Limitations

The goal of this study was not to generalize, but rather to provide insight

into the motivations for attending a preparatory school and the experiences of those at a postsecondary preparatory institution. One limitation was that the head coach reviewed the interview protocol and informed the primary researcher of questions and topics that were off limits. For example, the primary researcher could not ask questions about financial aid or any academic difficulties (learning disabilities). Furthermore, the head coach gave the researcher a list of PSAs, coaches, teachers, and administrators that she could speak with individually. Time also was a limitation as the focus groups with the PSAs were limited to ensure they did not detract from class time. Additionally, the primary researcher had arranged to speak with more parents. However, the location of the football game was changed at the last minute and several parents could not attend the game at its new location.

Future Research

Preparatory schools are virtually unexplored, and more research is needed regarding not only those who attend such institutions but about these institutions and athletic programs in general. It would be interesting to look at how these students have fared at four-year institutions. Curran (2014) believes that the benefits of attending a preparatory include building strength and increasing athletic ability. As such, research is needed on just how many student-athletes begin their postsecondary careers at preparatory schools and if going to

such institutions provides these students with an advantage both athletically and academically. Perceptions of collegiate coaches regarding recruiting PSAs from such institutions also warrant investigation. Furthermore, there is a need to look at the sports offerings at other preparatory schools and to further examine the experiences of those participating in sports outside of football.

Implications

One of the more astonishing facts that appeared in this study was that PSAs were factually unaware of initial eligibility standards, and as such, many of these athletes failed to meet NCAA initial eligibility standards. This issue easily can be rectified with awareness. Such awareness should start with the high school athletics governing bodies. When students participate in high school sport, their governing bodies need to issue each athlete such standards to ensure all those who wish to participate at the next level are eligible to do so. Additionally, high school coaches and counselors must be knowledgeable and be able to inform PSAs of the academic benchmarks they must achieve in order to be deemed a qualifier.

Thamel (2006) discussed the fact that postgraduate preparatory schools are often viewed as diploma mills in which sport participation is the only focus. This may be true in some cases, but it appeared that PSAs and stakeholders at Academy X felt the institution was rigorous, both on and off the field of play. The focus at Academy X was to prepare

students to become college student-athletes. Thus, perhaps PSAs and parents should be informed that postsecondary preparatory schools may be a beneficial option. Furthermore, this option does not require a PSA to use any eligibility (Curran, 2014; Diaz, 2015; Lewin, 2000; Thamel, 2006) and according to this study allows for the PSA to experience growth and maturity.

As such, the NCAA needs to start regulating these institutions, perhaps monitoring postsecondary preparatory schools separately from high schools. The NCAA also should provide a list of certified preparatory schools, assisting PSAs and their families in making an informed decision. Furthermore, perhaps like institutions could form a governing body to in essence legitimize themselves and increase awareness of their offerings.

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