

Transfer Student-Athletes: Prominent But Vulnerable

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ABSTRACT

Transfer students play a prominent role in Division I athletics, but the effects of transferring can often be detrimental to their academic performance. Providing a formal orientation course especially designed for new transfer student-athletes can be an effective means of helping them bridge the intercollegiate experience.

TRANSFER STUDENT-ATHLETES

Transfer student-athletes currently play a major role in collegiate athletics, and indications are that their numbers will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. While the National College Athletic Association (NCAA) provides no specific data on transfer student-athletes, a review of 192 of the nation's 293 Division I basketball teams shows that almost 29 percent of new players are transfers and that a majority of major conferences have more than 33 percent of new players coming from the transfer ranks (*1989-90 College Basketball Yearbook*). The review also shows that transfers from two-year colleges comprise 74 percent of all transfer players and 21 percent of all new players, while students transferring from other four-year institutions represent 26 percent of all transfer players and 7.5 percent of new players (see table below).

Number and Percentage of New Basketball Players in Major Division I Conferences for 1989-90

Conference	Total New Players		Two-Year College Transfers		Four-Year College Transfers		Total New Freshmen		Total New Transfers	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	American South	41	34	14	34	6	15	21	51	20
Atlantic Coast	31	3	1	3	1	3	29	94	2	6
Atlantic Ten	48	23	11	23	8	17	29	60	19	40
Big East	36	3	1	3	2	6	33	91	3	9
Big Eight	47	30	14	30	4	9	29	62	18	38
Big Sky	56	45	25	45	6	11	25	45	31	55
Big Ten	48	6	3	6	0	0	45	94	3	6
Big West	67	37	25	37	4	6	38	57	29	43
Colonial Athletic	48	13	6	13	7	15	35	74	13	26
Ivy League	38	0	0	0	1	3	37	97	1	3
Metro	44	16	7	16	4	9	33	75	11	25
Mid-American	36	19	7	19	2	6	27	75	9	25
Mid-Western	43	7	3	7	4	9	35	84	7	16
Missouri Valley	37	30	11	30	2	5	24	65	13	35
Ohio Valley	40	28	11	28	2	5	27	68	13	33
Pacific Ten	53	15	8	15	3	6	42	79	11	21
Southeastern	45	11	5	11	1	2	39	87	6	13
Southwest	47	32	15	32	3	6	29	62	18	38
Sun Belt	52	23	12	23	8	15	32	61	20	39
Western Athletic	48	27	13	27	7	15	28	58	20	42
West Coast	45	29	13	29	4	9	28	62	17	38
Totals	961	21	205	21	72	7.5	684	71.5	277	28.5

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE PROMINENCE OF TRANSFER STUDENT-ATHLETES

The frequent use of transfer student-athletes is a result of many factors, some not directly associated with athletic circumstances. For instance, it is not surprising that the growth in the number of transfer students over the past 25 years largely parallels the expansion of two-year colleges. In 1966 there were 837 two-year colleges in America, enrolling 1.4 million students and nearly 36 percent of all entering freshmen. Today there are over 1200 two-year colleges enrolling nearly 5 million students and 51 percent of all entering freshmen (El-Khawas, Carter, and Ottinger, 1988). No doubt, the 357 percent increase in two-year college enrollment has added to the pool of athletes attending the 475 National Junior College Athletic Association colleges and to the scores of community colleges which participate in their own state or regional athletic associations.

Of course, the growth in the number of transfer student-athletes is also attributable to circumstances within intercollegiate sports. Certainly, the recent reduction in athletic scholarships--particularly freshman scholarships--prevents many athletes from attending four-year institutions, as does the passage of Proposition 42, restricting access to four-year institutions for student-athletes not meeting academic performance standards. These factors have forced more high school athletes to begin their initial college experiences at two-year colleges.

In addition, heavy sanctioning of Division I institutions is contributing to transfer possibilities. With a majority of the 106 largest sports programs experiencing at least one sanction and with 30 percent of the 293 colleges in Division I being cited for infractions during the 1980's (Chronicle of Higher Education, January 3, 1990), a number of student-athletes are electing to transfer from institutions frequently plagued by infractions.

However, perhaps the most powerful factor affecting transfer student-athletes is the phenomenal rise in media revenues, resulting in more colleges joining Division I play (95 teams joined Division I basketball during the 1980's). A case in point is that there were at least 1425 more players in Division I in 1990 than in 1980. While this growth may deplete the pool of quality freshman players, it clearly provides more opportunities for transfer student-athletes to secure spots on teams at four-year institutions.

Higher revenues have not only increased the number of teams and participants, but they are often accompanied by increasing pressure to succeed athletically. One result of these pressures is a high turnover rate among head coaches. For example, following the 1988-89 season, 19.5 percent of the head coaches in Division I basketball either quit, retired, or were released (1989-90 College Basketball Yearbook.) Such attrition requires some teams to depend more on transfers during times of organizational transition.

Lucrative playoff returns also invite institutions to seek immediate solutions to guarantee athletic success; therefore, many coaches elect to utilize more physically mature and experienced two-year college student-athletes to bolster sagging programs. This approach is particularly valued at western rural area institutions where a limited number of quality freshman players live in sparsely populated areas of the West.

TRANSFER STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The use of transfer student-athletes in salvaging, resurrecting, or maintaining quality sports programs places a heavy burden upon institutions to provide a solid academic footing for these student-athletes. Establishing such an academic foundation for transfers is a formidable task in light of findings which suggest that transfer students as a group are at an academic disadvantage during the transition to their new institutions. Research shows that transfers often feel isolated and do not frequently interact with institutional personnel (Johnson, 1987). In addition, transfers commonly experience a severe drop in grade point

average during their first year on new campuses (Lenning, 1977; Payne, Ridenour, and Wood, 1988; Sheldon, 1982). Additional studies indicate that transfer student attrition rates are double those of native students (Johnson, 1987). And finally, reports show that transfers infrequently utilize institutional support services which are designed to help them (Stumpf and Brown, 1988).

A FORMAL ORIENTATION COURSE FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS

The plight of transfer student-athletes led Oregon State University to develop an extended orientation course specifically designed for the transfer student. Similar orientation courses patterned after the nationally acclaimed University 101 Program at the University of South Carolina have often been cited as effective in addressing the adjustment problems of entering freshmen (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989; Boyer, 1987). Moreover, studies have shown that participation in such courses has a positive effect upon freshman academic performance, retention rates, and involvement with the campus and faculty (Rivers, 1985; Sheldon, 1982; Wilkie and Kuckuck, 1989; Lawson, 1983; Donnangelo, 1985; Jones, 1984). The effects of such extended orientation courses have resulted in an increasing number of campuses utilizing the concept to assist freshmen (El-Khawas, 1984). However, similar courses designed specifically for transfer students are rare, while courses designed for transfer student-athletes are rarer still.

Thus, in an effort to help transfer students with their adjustment to a new campus, Oregon State University offers a two-credit course entitled "Transfer Student Orientation." The course is a 12-week experience and has the added feature of specialized sections to address the needs of selected transfer student populations, including student-athletes. The transfer student-athletes' section is taught by a staff member from the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. Student participation in this section is voluntary but is recommended by coaches, staff, and campus academic advisors.

Objectives of the transfer student-athlete course include the following:

- (1) Sharpening the academic, social, and cultural survival skills of transfer student-athletes so that they may become more effective and efficient learners.
- (2) Helping transfer student-athletes understand departmental, university, and NCAA policies and procedures.
- (3) Providing transfer student-athletes with an opportunity to interact with faculty, staff, and community members in a more personal and informal manner.
- (4) Increasing transfer student-athletes' appreciation for and involvement with the cultural and co-curricular life of the campus.

- (5) Providing transfer student-athletes with a supportive atmosphere in which to foster greater feelings of community, friendliness, and a positive sense of the campus climate.
- (6) Helping transfer student-athletes to develop more positive attitudes about the learning process.
- (7) Enhancing transfer student-athletes' academic performance.
- (8) Strengthening transfer student-athletes' commitment to the university.

Course content centers upon the following broad themes and topics:

Theme One - University/Community Awareness

- Topics: University rules and regulations
 NCAA and Pac-10 Conference rules and regulations
 Campus tours and guest speakers
 Campus academic and athletic department services and resources
 Establishment of a positive attitude toward campus among student-athletes
 Knowledge of the local community's habits and facilities

Theme Two - Personal/Academic Awareness

- Topics: Methods and procedures for goal setting and career preparation
 Understanding personal values/motivational techniques
 Internship experiences
 Career awareness activities

Theme Three - Coping Skills

- Topics: Knowledge of personal study habits and attitudes
 Study skill development and time management
 Test taking and preparation skills
 Development of communicative skills
 Understanding and relating to university faculty and staff
 Dealing with the media

SUMMARY

Preliminary research on the transfer course concept has shown that participants are more academically and socially integrated into the campus environment and that they experience more academic success than transfer students who do not participate in the course (Rice and Thomas, 1990). The orientation course format is proving to be an effective means for helping the increasingly important but often vulnerable group of transfer student-athletes.

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