

Athletes and Academic Performance: A Study of Athletes at an NCAA Division I Institution

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Abstract

The academic records of the athletes at a major Division I program were examined for the academic year 1980-81. The athletes were categorized by sex, grant-in-aid status, race, and as participating in either a revenue or non-revenue sport.

The study documents that female athletes perform well academically. White male athletes achieve at their predicted grade point average. However, the results indicate that there is a specific problem area within the athletic population, specifically, the black athletes participating in football and basketball. The black student-athlete is often less prepared and experiences more serious academic problems than the white student-athlete.

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Recently, the relationship between athletics and academics has come to the forefront of national news and national concern. In January, 1983, at its national convention, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) passed legislation requiring that prospective college athletes score at least 700 on the SAT test or 15 on the ACT test and earn at least a 2.0 grade point average in 11 selected high school college-preparatory courses (math, English, science, and social science) in order to participate in intercollegiate competition during their freshman year. This legislation follows several years of concern about the weaknesses of high school and college requirements for academic eligibility and years of abuse of academic standards. In 1986, the NCAA amended the legislation to include a floating scale, which allows for a higher grade point average to compensate for a lower test score or a higher test score to compensate for a lower grade point average. When a 2.2 or higher grade point average is achieved the minimum acceptable test score then becomes 660 on the SAT or 13 on the ACT.

This legislation, however, has resulted in heated debate among educators on both sides of the issue. Many black college presidents argue that these requirements discriminate against the black athlete and will have a negative impact on the role of blacks in college athletics. Others argue that aid based

on athletic ability encourages student exploitation and the recruitment of athletes with little or no academic ability. Major criticisms of college athletics are aimed at the revenue-producing sports (football and basketball) and sports which may serve as minor leagues for the pros. If the criticisms and concerns have validity, the greater the potential revenue production of the sport, the greater the chances for exploitation of the athletes. It would also follow that the greater the athletes' actual or perceived chances of pursuing professional athletic careers, the more readily they will allow themselves to be exploited.

Belief in the myth that sport participation is a path of upward social and economic mobility creates a vulnerable attitude where the athlete, especially the black athlete, is left open to exploitation. Harry Edwards (Edwards, 1973; Coakley, 1982), a black sociologist, is concerned with the fact that, in the past 20 years, colleges have allowed "money" sports—football and basketball—to become farm systems for the professional leagues.

Many athletes have embraced another myth—that the sole purpose of attending college is to make the pros (Underwood, 1980). Students who are extremely weak academically are often invited into college to pursue the improbable dream: to become one of the less than two percent of college players who make it into the NFL or NBA. In 1980, there were fewer than 1,000 black athletes making a living in professional sports (Underwood, 1980). However, black American culture has fostered the belief that professional sports are a way out of the ghetto, not only for that athlete but for his entire family.

News reports describe isolated incidents of athletes, especially black athletes, being recruited and attending college with little chance of academic success. However, few studies have thoroughly investigated the academic records of athletes at major universities. This study examines the records of athletes at one major Division I program. Because of the sensitivity of the data, the institution will not be further identified. It is hoped, however, that the results of this study may serve to further the debate regarding the impact of the new legislation on all athletes, not just the black athlete.

The study was conducted to test the following hypotheses:

1. There are differences in the academic performances of male and female athletes.
2. There are differences in the academic performance of male athletes participating in revenue sports (football and basketball) and male athletes participating in non-revenue sports.
3. There are differences in the academic performance of minority and non-minority athletes.
4. There are differences in the academic performance of athletes receiving grant-in-aid and no grant-in-aid.

For the purposes of the analyses each athlete was classified according to four independent variables. First, the athlete was classified as either male or

female. Second, the sport the athlete participated in was defined as revenue or non-revenue. Men's football and men's basketball are the only sports defined by the NCAA as revenue sports. All others are considered non-revenue sports. The third independent variable was the athlete's grant-in-aid status. The athlete was classified as receiving full, partial or no grant-in-aid. The fourth independent variable was the athlete's minority status. Black athletes were defined as minority, and white athletes were defined as non-minority. No other racial groups were present in the sample.

Table 1 presents selected grade point averages for the three sex-revenue combinations. Male revenue-sport athletes include only athletes participating in football and basketball, the main revenue-producers at most major universities. All other male athletes were defined as male non-revenue athletes. All female athletes were defined as female non-revenue athletes. The female athletes achieved significantly higher ($p < .01$) than either male non-revenue or male revenue athletes on all academic measures. In addition, the male non-revenue athletes achieved significantly higher ($p < .05$) than their male revenue counterparts on each of the grade point averages.

Table 1
Selected Grade Average for Sex-Revenue Combinations

	Total Ave		BER Ave		Total Ave in Season		Predicted Grade Ave	
Female	2.87		2.82		2.88		2.75	
Non-Rev	} **		} **		} **		} **	
Male								
Non-Rev	2.47		2.39		2.43		2.46	
Male	} *		} *		} *		} *	
Revenue								
Overall	2.25		2.08		2.09		2.27	
University	2.57							

* $P < .05$

** $P < .01$

Four selected grade point averages were of primary importance. First, the total grade point average for all attempted courses was recorded. The second grade point average was the average for courses listed as Basic Education Requirements. The Basic Education Requirements (BER) consist of a core of required courses in the areas of mathematics, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Although not every student is required to take exactly the same basic education courses, the BER average is the most consistent measure for comparing the records of student with different academic majors. The third average is the total grade point average achieved during the athlete's season of competition. The fourth measure was the predicted grade point average. The predicted grade point average was determined by using the student's high school class rank and ACT composite score. The prediction formula was the

result of a multiple regression based on the student's ACT scores and high school ranks. This average was important in determining what grades might reasonable be expected of a student.

A common impression is that grant-in-aid athletes, athletes receiving financial aid based on athletic ability, are weaker academically than non grant-in-aid athletes. Table 2 presents selected grade point averages for each grant-in-aid classification. There were three grant-in-aid categories. First, athletes may be on a full grant, including tuition, fees, and room and board. Second, the athlete may be receiving partial financial assistance, either tuition and fees, or room and board, but not both. An athlete was classified as receiving no grant if he received no aid from the athletic department. The full-grant athletes scored significantly lower ($p < .05$) than either the partial-grant or no-grant athletes on each of the four grade averages. These included the total grade point average, the grade point average for basic education requirements, the total average during the season of competition, and the predicted grade point average.

Table 2
Grade Averages by Grant-In-Aid Status

	Total Ave	BER Ave	Total Ave in Season	Predicted Grade Ave
Full Grant	2.44	2.31	2.33	2.41
Partial Grant	2.71	2.68	2.67	2.62
No Grant	2.64	2.58	2.66	2.61
Overall University	2.57			

* $P < .05$

** $P < .01$

Because the revenue-sport athletes attained lower grade point averages than the non-revenue sport athletes, it was of interest to determine the grade point averages for only the non-revenue athletes. Table 3 presents the grade point average by grant-in-aid status for the non-revenue sport athletes. After removing revenue-sport athletes, who are all full-grant athletes, from the analysis, there was no significant difference on any of the variables. Therefore, if full-grant athletes are weaker students than no-grant athletes, this is true only for revenue sports. In fact, it appears athletes in non-revenue sports perform well in comparison with the general student body, although this difference is not significant.

Table 3
Grade Averages by Grant-In-Aid Status for Non-Revenue Sports

	Total Ave	BER Ave	Total Ave in Season	Predicted Grade Ave
Full Grant	2.68	2.60	2.61	2.58
Partial Grant	2.71	2.68	2.67	2.62
No Grant	2.64	2.58	2.66	2.61

* $P < .05$

** $P < .01$

Recently, much attention has been given to the black athlete in college sports. Harry Edwards, in a "Sixty Minutes" interview, stated that the black athlete has been a victim of a system which encourages him to believe that professional athletics is his vehicle for upward mobility (Sixty Minutes, 1980). Therefore, it is important to look at the black athlete as a factor. Table 4 presents the distribution of minority athletes in each sex-revenue sport combination. It is clear that the proportion of black athletes in male revenue sports, football and basketball, dramatically exceeds the proportion of black athletes in either male or female non-revenue sports.

Table 4
Athletes in Each Sex-Revenue Combination

	Black Athletes	White Athletes	% Black
Female Non Rev	11	226	4%
Male Non Rev	16	313	5%
Male Revenue	43	61	41%

The differences between the academic performances of minority and non-minority athletes in the revenue sports were investigated. Selected grade point averages by sex-revenue combination and minority status are presented in Table 5. Because there were so few black athletes in the non-revenue sports, these averages could not be statistically interpreted and, therefore, were not presented. Therefore, the averages for the white athletes participating in male non-revenue sports were essentially equal to the averages for all athletes, black and white, participating in those sports. There were no significant differences ($p < .05$) between the white male revenue-sport athletes and the white male non-revenue sport athletes on any of the academic measures. The black male revenue-sport athletes were significantly lower ($p < .05$) than the white male athletes on all academic measures. The

female athletes were significantly higher than the white male athletes on all academic measures. It is important to note that there are significant differences among the athletes with respect to their predicted grade point averages. Thus it is unrealistic to expect the different categories of athletes to achieve the same grade averages. What may be more reasonable is to hope that each athlete achieves academically at a level comparable to or exceeding his predicted grade point average.

Table 5
Grade Averages by Sex-Rev and Minority Status

	Total Ave	BER Ave	Total Ave in Season	Predicted Grade Ave
Female Non-Rev	2.87	2.82	2.88	2.75
Male Non-Rev	2.47	2.39	2.43	2.46
White Male Rev	2.51	2.40	2.42	2.44
Black Male Rev	1.99	1.77	1.73	2.11

*P<.05

**P<.01

The average ACT scores, high school class ranks, the difference between the achieved BER average and the predicted grade point average are presented in Table 6. The difference between the achieved BER and predicted grade point average is of particular importance because it may be the best measure of whether a student is attaining his academic potential. The achieved BER average and the predicted grade point average were not significantly different for female athletes, male non-revenue athletes, and white male revenue athletes.

Table 6
Predictive Scores by Sex-Rev Minority Status

	ACT Score	High School Class Rank	Difference Between Achieved BER-Predicted
Female Non-Rev	22.04	.820	-.07
Male Non-Rev	19.23	.630	-.07
White Male Rev	19.11	.637	-.04
Black Male Rev	13.57	.527	-.34

*P<.05

**P<.01

The black athlete achieved significantly lower ($p<.05$) on the earned BER average than was predicted. Female athletes achieved significantly higher ($p<.05$) ACT and high school ranks than the other athletes. It is particularly important to note that the average high school rank of the black revenue-sport athlete was the 53rd percentile, or slightly above average for the individual high school. This was not significantly different from the other male athletes at the .05 level. Yet, on the ACT test score, the black revenue athlete averaged under 14, which was significantly lower ($p<.01$) than the other male athletes. This may be a very important relationship. It indicates that it is possible for the minority student to do well in his high school, yet still not be prepared to do well on the ACT test or to survive in college courses.

Although most students at this institution take the ACT test, many take the SAT or both tests. The average SAT for black athletes was 761 and for black revenue sport athletes was 722. This compares with an average of 694 for all black students nationwide as reported recently by the SAT Board (Biemiller, 1982). The average SAT among white students nationwide and for white student-athletes at this institution were both approximately 925. The SAT Board reported these averages in an effort to enlighten the public to the magnitude of the problem which must be overcome.

It would be highly inaccurate to conclude that this athletic department has ignored the academic progress of its student athletes. There has been a comprehensive program of counseling services and academic support services, including tutorial services, in effect for almost 20 years. This program employs three full-time academic counselors and more than 60 tutors. The tutoring program has undoubtedly helped many athletes to attain their academic potential.

This research has been conducted to enable a better understanding of the academic problems facing student athletes. Although this data touches on sensitive issues, these issues must be examined if programs which will help student athletes attain their academic potential are to be improved or new approaches implemented.

Conclusions

Based on the academic data the following conclusions for athletes at this Division I program seem warranted:

1. Female athletes both predict and achieve higher than male athletes on most academic measures.
2. No significant differences were observed on academic measures between full-grant, partial-grant, and no-grant athletes participating in either male or female non-revenue sports.
3. No significant differences were observed on academic measures between white athletes in male revenue sports and white athletes in male non-revenue sports.

4. Male black athletes participating in revenue sports encounter significantly greater problems academically than male white athletes participating in either revenue or non-revenue sports.
5. Although many minority athletes are less prepared for and encounter serious difficulties with their college work, the average minority student's high school class rank was at or slightly above the median.
6. Athletes, except for black revenue sport athletes, achieve at their predicted grade averages.

Recommendations

1. Assessment of academic ability should receive high priority during the recruiting of any athlete.
2. A comprehensive program of academic assistance and tutoring should be made available to the student-athletes and should begin as early as possible.
3. In particular, the needs and academic objectives of minority athletes should be assessed.
4. Further study of student-athletes, particularly minority athletes, should be made to better understand the academic problems in this sensitive area.
5. A variety of experimental programs should be developed and tested to help athletes achieve their academic potential.
6. Similar studies should be replicated at other institutions with major athletic programs.

Discussion

This research examined the academic records of the athletes at one Division I athletic program. The results document that, at this university, female athletes perform well in the classroom. White male athletes achieve at approximately their predicted grade point average. Black male student-athletes participating in revenue sports experience more serious academic problems than white student-athletes.

It is clear that there are substantial differences in the academic and cultural backgrounds of white and black student-athletes prior to the students' college entrance. However, this study was not designed to detect a cause-effect relationship. Thus to conclude that the university, the athletic department, or any specific factor has caused the academic differences between groups is not warranted.

The results of this research indicate that there is a specific problem area within this athletic population, specifically the black male revenue athlete. In the four years that a black athlete is at any post-secondary institution, it may be impossible to unravel and correct all of the factors which have contributed to the athlete's academic problems. Yet an awareness of the problem is an important first step.

Although it is not valid to conclude that the relationships which exist among the athletes at one university also hold for athletic programs at other major universities, it is likely that similar relationships hold. Further research is needed to better understand the academic problems of student athletes. This research provides a model which can be replicated at other institutions. As others conduct similar research, the degree to which these results generalize will be more fully understood. Some may not want this type of sensitive research to be conducted. Research must be conducted if programs are to be designed and implemented to assist student-athletes, particularly minority student-athletes, attain their academic potential.

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