

A Comparison of the Satisfaction Levels of Collegiate Student-Athletes and their Non-Athlete Peers with their Collegiate Experience

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ABSTRACT

Research examining the satisfaction level of student athletes with their overall collegiate experience has been minimal. This study examined the existence of differences between collegiate student-athletes satisfaction and the satisfaction of their non-athlete peers. Eleven scales of satisfaction were examined using the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory. The statistical analysis of the data indicated five scales to be significantly different. Increased levels of satisfaction among the student-athletes were found on the scales of academic advisement, recruitment and financial aid, and safety and security. Decreased levels of satisfaction were found on the scales of campus life and campus climate.

INTRODUCTION

Intercollegiate athletic participation, its benefits as well as its costs to the student-athlete, has been given considerable attention in the past few years sparking much debate. Proponents of intercollegiate athletics argue that the benefits of participation outweigh the costs to the student-athlete. Participation in college sports has been related to self-reports of higher levels of self-esteem and status on campus, growth in interpersonal skills and leadership abilities, and intense loyalty to sport and school (Pinkerton, Hinz, & Barrow, 1989; Ryan, 1989; Adler & Adler, 1988). Intercollegiate athletic participation also has been found to contribute to the personal growth of student-athletes and satisfaction with campus life (Richards & Aries, 1999; Astin, 1993). Ryan (1989) found that involvement in intercollegiate athletics may highly contribute to the achievement of affective educational goals. Research also seems to suggest that the student-athlete's unique set of experiences during college are particularly rich in terms of their potential for impact on adaptive and critical thinking processes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In addition, in a study conducted in 1990, Pascarella and Smart (as cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) found that athletic participation had a positive effect on bachelor's degree completion for some students.

Others however, argue that intercollegiate athletic participation may be detrimental to the student-athlete's academic, vocational, and social development (Pinkerton, et al., 1989; Blann, 1985; Parham, 1993). As early as 1929, in a report commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation to study college athletics, Savage found that proponents of college athletics claimed far greater benefits for the student-athlete

than intercollegiate athletics could ever yield (as cited in Cowley, 1999). The demands of intercollegiate athletic participation far exceed that of other extracurricular activities (Richards & Aries, 1999; Pinkerton, et al., 1989). Students choosing college athletics are frequently forced to sacrifice attention to academic, social, and leisure needs in order to participate (Astin, 1978; Parham, 1993; Stone & Strange, 1989). Researchers have reported that student-athletes have problems that may stem from the heavy demands of the athletic role and its conflict with other important roles and activities (Chartrand & Lent, 1987). Astin (1978) observed that athletes may be isolated from their peers. Other studies have suggested that student-athletes are not well integrated into campus life because they have formed separate subcultures with separate characteristics and values (Parham, 1993; Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992). According to Pinkerton, et al., (1989), "athletic participation at the college level creates major personal and emotional demand on the sports participant" (p.224).

Although the benefits and costs of intercollegiate athletic participation have been much debated, little attention has been given to whether or not these benefits and costs impact the student athlete's satisfaction with his or her overall collegiate experience. Student satisfaction has been associated with involvement during college and may be related to persistence to graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) contend that persistence, is in large part, a function of the student's fit with the college environment or person-environment fit. They stipulate that various terms are used to represent degree of person-environment fit, including, integration, involvement, congruence, and satisfaction. Pascarella and Terenzini operationally define degree of person-environment fit in terms of the student's interactions with the academic and social systems of the college or, indirectly, with those factors that shape the nature of such interactions. Academic and social factors influencing fit or satisfaction, according to Pascarella and Terenzini include academic achievement, peer relationships, extracurricular involvement, interactions with faculty, academic major, residence, orientation, advising, financial aid and work. Astin (1993) found that measures of satisfaction with the undergraduate experience are significantly related to number of undergraduate years completed. Astin describes measures contributing to the student's level of satisfaction with the total undergraduate experience, which impact number of years completed, as the quality of academic instruction, contacts with faculty and fellow students, curriculum, degree of faculty interest in students, relationship with the college administration, the degree of institutional priority given to issues such as diversity, social change, resource acquisition, facilities, and enhancement of institutional reputation. He concluded that there seemed to be an association between student satisfaction and retention in college.

METHOD

Research Question

In his 1993 book, What Matters in College, Astin examined how students change and develop in college and revealed how the collegiate experience enhanced that development. Student satisfaction was one of the collegiate experiential factors which he identified as enhancing holistic student development. He stated, "...it is difficult to argue that student satisfaction can be legitimately subordinated to any other

education outcome” (p. 273). This study was conducted to determine if detectable differences exist between the student satisfaction of collegiate student-athletes and the student satisfaction of collegiate non-athlete students with their overall college experience. For the purposes of this study, eleven scales identified through the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI), published by Noel-Levitz, Inc. (1999), were adopted as indicators of student satisfaction. The eleven scales measuring students’ satisfaction with an institution are academic advisement effectiveness, campus climate, campus life, campus support services, concern for the individual, instructional effectiveness, recruitment and financial aid, registration effectiveness, safety and security, service excellence, and student centeredness.

Participants

The study involved students from the general campus population and intercollegiate student-athletes enrolled at a mid-sized, urban, state-supported university located in the southeastern United States. The student-athletes examined competed at the NCAA Division I level in the sports of men’s baseball, basketball, cross country, football (1-AA), golf, and tennis; and women’s sports of basketball, cross country, golf, rifle, softball, tennis, track, and volleyball. There was a total of 644 students participating in this study. Student-athletes represented 168 of the participants and the remaining 476 were students who were not members of an intercollegiate athletic team.

Of those student-athletes participating in the study, the majority were Caucasian (67%); male (65%); had a GPA of a 2.0 or greater (78%), and resided on campus (63%). Slightly more freshmen student athletes participated in the study than other class levels (36%). Slightly less than half indicated that the institution was their first school choice (48%). Of those students participating in the study who were not members of an intercollegiate athletic team, the majority were Caucasian (77%); female (66%); had a GPA of a 2.0 or greater (88%); resided off campus (80%); and indicated that the institution was their first school choice (60%). Slightly more seniors student non-athletes participated in the study than other class levels (30%).

Instrument

The SSI, specifically developed for use in higher education, was designed to measure student satisfaction across twelve scales. (For this study, the SSI scale addressing responsiveness to diverse populations was not used as it did not provide gap data.) Noel-Levitz, Inc. (1999), developers of the SSI, stated:

The Student Satisfaction Inventory measures students’ satisfaction with a wide range of college experiences. Students rate each item in the inventory by importance of the specific expectation as well as their satisfaction with how well that expectation is being met. A performance gap is then determined by the difference in the importance rating and the satisfaction rating. Items with large performance gaps indicate areas on campus where students perceive their expectations are not being met.

(p. 1)

The twelve scales of satisfaction are described for the user by Noel-Levitz, Inc. (1999). The academic advising effectiveness scale assesses the comprehensiveness of the academic advising program. The campus climate scale assesses the extent to

which the institution provides experiences which promote a sense of campus pride and feelings of belonging. The campus life scale assesses the effectiveness of student life programs offered by the institution, covering issues ranging from athletics to residence life. The campus support services scale assesses the quality of the support programs and services which students utilize in order to make their educational experiences more meaningful and productive. The concern for the individual scale assesses the institution's commitment to treating each student as an individual. The instructional effectiveness scale assesses the students' academic experience, curriculum, and the campus' overriding commitment to academic excellence. The recruitment and financial aid effectiveness scale assesses the institution's ability to enroll students in an effective manner. The registration effectiveness scale assesses institutional issues associated with registration and billing. The responsiveness to diverse populations scale assesses the institution's commitment to specific groups of students enrolled at the institution. The safety and security scale assesses the institution's responsiveness to students' personal safety and security on campus. The service excellence scale assesses the perceived attitude of staff toward students, especially front-line staff. The student centeredness scale assesses the campus' efforts to convey to students that they are important to the institution.

The scale concerning responsiveness to diverse populations did not provide gap data. The items associated with this scale allowed a participant to rank their satisfaction but did not allow a participant to rank importance. Lack of importance data for this scale lead to a lack of gap scores for this scale, subsequently the scale was excluded from analysis for the purposes of this study.

The SSI has shown exceptionally high internal reliability as evidenced by Cronbach's coefficient alpha of 0.97 for the set of importance scores and 0.98 for the set of satisfaction scores. Reliability over time was demonstrated through the three-week, test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.85 for importance scores and 0.84 for satisfaction scores. Evidence to support the validity of the SSI was illustrated through convergent validity that was assessed by correlating satisfaction scores from the SSI with satisfaction scores from the College Student Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSSQ). The Pearson correlation between these two instruments $r = 0.71$, $P < 0.00001$) supported validity. (Noel-Levitz, Inc., 1999)

Procedure

The SSI was administered to a sampling of classes that met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 10:00 a.m. during the Fall of 1999. In addition, each student-athlete was asked to complete the survey during a specific team meeting held during the Fall 1999 semester. If a student-athlete had completed the survey during a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday class the student-athlete was asked not to complete the survey again.

The surveys were sent to Noel-Levitz, Inc. for scanning, returning the raw data on a computer disk. These data were analyzed and sorted using Database2 and Microsoft Access. Data were then statistically analyzed using Microsoft Excel. These data were then divided into the two groups, student-athletes and non-athletes, based on a self-reported identification item included in the instrument.

The gap scores of eleven of the twelve scales of satisfaction of the two groups were statistically tested for significant differences using t-test analysis.

RESULTS

Demographics

The self-reported demographic information gathered included gender, class level, grade point average, ethnicity, residence, and school choice. As shown in Table 1, chi-square analysis of the groups indicated each piece of demographic information was dependent on the student's athletic status.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES: STUDENT-ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES

Significant differences in the gap scores of the student-athletes and the non-athletes were detected in five of the eleven scales measuring student satisfaction. Those scales were academic advisement ($t = -7.29, p < 0.001$), recruitment and financial aid ($t = -2.66, p = 0.008$), safety and security ($t = -3.26, p = 0.001$), campus climate ($t = 2.4, p = 0.017$), and campus life ($t = 10.5, p < 0.001$). Table 2 provides a summary of the gap scores of the SSI satisfaction scales.

Student-athletes reported lower gap scores, indicative of greater student satisfaction with expectations met by the institution, than those of their non-athlete peers across three scales of satisfaction. Those scales were academic advisement, recruitment and financial aid, and safety and security. Student-athletes reported higher gap scores than their non-athlete peers, indicative of lower levels of student-athlete satisfaction, across the scales of campus climate and campus life.

NO DETECTABLE DIFFERENCES: STUDENT-ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES

No significant differences were detected in the gap scores of student-athletes and non-athletes in six of the eleven scales measuring student satisfaction. Those scales were service excellence ($t = -1.57, p = 0.12$), student centeredness ($t = 0.85, p = 0.39$), campus support services ($t = -1.17, p = 0.24$), concern for the individual ($t = 0.29, p = 0.77$), instructional effectiveness ($t = 0.72, p = 0.47$), and registration effectiveness ($t = -1.11, p = 0.27$).

DISCUSSION

Five of the eleven scales examined indicated statistically significant differences between student-athletes and their non-athlete peers. Those scales in which student-athletes were more satisfied than their non-athlete peers included academic advisement, recruitment and financial aid, and safety and security. The scales indicating less student-athlete satisfaction included campus climate and campus life. These results represented expected outcomes based upon the researchers' perceptions of the ethos of this Division I athletic department housed in the mid-sized, urban, state-supported university located in the southeastern United States which was examined in this study.

These researchers consider the positive caring ethos of the athletic department to be the primary factor influencing higher levels of satisfaction in student-athletes. The athletic department has demonstrated its commitment to the academic life of the student-athlete, specifically through the development and implementation of an

academic support unit responsible for academic advisement and academic intervention for first-year and academically at-risk student-athletes.

Greater satisfaction for student-athletes on the scale of academic advisement may be attributed to the direct, individualized intervention of the academic support personnel in the athletic department. A relationship is established between the academic support unit and the student-athlete on their initial campus visit. This begins an on-going, intentional, individualized program of intervention to foster the student-athlete's academic success. Specific interventions provided to new student-athletes, both first-year and transfer, include advisement during summer registrations, conducting of an orientation program, and weekly meetings with first-year and academically at-risk student-athletes.

Again, the individualized attention displayed toward the student-athlete in the recruitment and admission processes affect the increased satisfaction of student-athletes on the scale of recruitment and financial aid. These researchers do not necessarily think that the individualized attention given to students during the recruitment process is unique to the athletic department of the institution under study. We believe this to be an inherent characteristic of athletic recruitment at any institution of higher education. Increased satisfaction with the financial aid process however may be a result of this athletic department's ethos. Student-athletes and their families are assisted in the processes involved in obtaining financial aid, including athletic scholarships, academic scholarships, and federal and state awards by designated athletic department staff. The support received by student-athletes through the athletic department is in addition to the assistance available to non-athlete students. This support, these researchers contend, has contributed to the higher satisfaction of student-athletes on this scale.

The third scale in which student-athletes demonstrated higher satisfaction than their non-athlete peers was safety and security. Items addressed by this scale included parking availability and lighting of parking facilities, as well as, the safety of the campus in general. The statistically significant difference detected in this scale should be interpreted with caution. Sixty-three percent of student-athletes sampled reside on campus. Because of their on-campus status, parking is not seen as a major issue of contention for student-athletes. Additionally, student-athletes frequently negotiate the physical space of the campus with their teammates. This type of group association provides student-athletes with an intrinsic sense of safety. In contrast, the significance may be influenced by the heightened dissatisfaction with parking and campus safety of the commuter non-athlete students which represented 80% of the sample.

The scales of campus life and campus climate indicated student-athletes were less satisfied than their non-athlete peers. Both scales measured the student-athlete's connection to and interaction with the total campus environment. The campus life scale specifically addressed weekend activities, availability of organizations, and residence life facilities and services. Given the higher percentage of student-athletes residing on-campus and as this campus is perceived to be a "suitease college" with very limited weekend activities the heightened dissatisfaction of student-athletes on this scale should be interpreted with caution. Student-athletes when compared with their non-athlete peers, as campus residents and because of the nature of their athletic participation, may be more sensitive to what they perceive to be a lack of weekend

activities. Additionally, this group, as campus residents who frequently spend their entire collegiate career residing in campus housing, may have a heightened dissatisfaction with the residence life facilities and services. Student non-athletes, attending the institution at which this study was conducted, are much less likely to live in the residence halls and if they do, spend much less time in their residence halls on weekends and during school breaks. However, as previously discussed, Parham (1993) and Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston (1992) found that student-athletes were not well integrated into campus life because they form separate sub-cultures through team membership with separate characteristics and values than those held by their non-athlete peers.

An increased level of dissatisfaction of student-athletes on the campus life scale which measured a student's sense of belonging and school pride may be influenced by the athlete's submersion in the athletic culture at the institution under study. In addition, the institution at which this study was conducted does not have a high level of student and community support of athletic activities, even for those sports with a winning tradition, as is evidenced by low attendance at events, which may contribute to the student-athletes' dissatisfaction with school pride.

The results of this study seem to support Astin's (1978) observation that student-athletes may be isolated from their non-athlete peers, as well as Chartrand and Lent's (1987) claim that student-athletes experience conflict stemming from the heavy demands of their athletic role.

The findings of this study have implications for the entire university community but more specifically for athletic department, enrollment management, and student affairs practitioners as they struggle with issues of satisfaction and its impact on the recruitment, retention, and success of student athletes matriculating to and through their institution. Student satisfaction is a highly complex construct that should not be subordinated to any other educational outcome. Future research should be directed at operationalizing student-athlete satisfaction with their university experience and to determine how an athletic department's ethos impacts student-athlete satisfaction with their overall collegiate experience.

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TABLE 1

Summary of χ^2 Statistics to Detect Dependence of Athletic Status to Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	P		df	p
	Student Athletes n=168	Non-Athletes n=476		
Ethnicity				
African American	21%	13%	3	0.039*
Caucasian	67%	77%		
Other	12%	10%		
Gender				
Female	35%	66%	1	<0.001*
Male	65%	34%		
Class Level				
Freshmen	36%	15%	3	<0.001*
Sophomore	24%	28%		
Junior	23%	27%		
Senior	17%	30%		
Grade Point Average				
3.5-4.0	8%	19%	5	<0.001*
3.0-3.49	22%	27%		
2.5-2.99	26%	13%		
2.0-2.49	22%	13%		
0.00-1.99	2%	2%		
no credits earned	19%	8%		
Residence				
On-Campus Dorm	63%	20%	4	<0.001*
Own Home	8%	25%		
Rent Off-Campus	23%	26%		
Live with Parents	5%	24%		
Other	2%	5%		
School Choice				
First	48%	60%	2	<0.001*
Second	29%	28%		
Third or Lower	23%	12%		

Note. * denotes probability levels at the < 0.05 level of confidence.

TABLE 2

Summary of Gap Scores of SSI Scales

Scales of Satisfaction	M	p
Academic Advisement		
Effectiveness		
Student-athletes	0.75	p<0.001*
Non-athletes	1.21	
Campus Climate		
Student-athletes	1.26	p = 0.017*
Non-athletes	1.17	
Campus Life		
Student-athletes	1.48	p<0.001*
Non-athletes	0.97	
Campus Support Services		
Student-athletes	0.98	p = 0.241
Non-athletes	1.05	
Concern for the Individual		
Student-athletes	1.22	p = 0.770
Non-athletes	1.20	
Instruction Effectiveness		
Student-athletes	1.21	p = 0.473
Non-athletes	1.19	
Recruitment and Financial Aid		
Student-athletes	1.42	p = 0.008*
Non-athletes	1.61	
Registration Effectiveness		
Student-athletes	1.19	p = 0.227
Non-athletes	1.27	
Safety and Security		
Student-athletes	1.82	p = 0.001*
Non-athletes	2.14	
Service Excellence		
Student-athletes	1.20	p = 0.117
Non-athletes	1.29	
Student Centeredness		
Student-athletes	1.13	p = 0.394
Non-athletes	1.08	

Note. * denotes probability levels at the < 0.05 level of confidence. The lower the gap score, the better a satisfaction rating meets an importance rating.

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