

Paths Between The Locker Room and The Library: An Analysis of Role Conflict Among Student Athletes

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Introduction

Student-athletes in a university setting are frequently identified as examples for illustrations of the concept of role conflict. The likelihood of such conflict is seen more probable among athletes participating in "big-time" athletic programs (Coakley, 1982; Persell, 1984; and Edwards, 1973). The basic argument is that persons occupying these two roles encounter conflicting demands on their time, physical and mental energy, and have other commitments which make it difficult to effectively and efficiently perform both roles. Yet as Nordlie (1984) notes, very little research has been conducted on student-athlete role conflict. This paper examines the background concerning the interest in student-athlete role conflict and then raises a number of issues focusing on the analysis of role conflict. Suggestions are then offered as examples of ways to further research role conflict.

Background Themes

Interest in the concept of role conflict emerges from several contexts. One is a common sense perspective. Most observers of intercollegiate sport are aware of the popularity and interest in big-time commercial intercollegiate athletics. Recently we were inundated with sport stories and media hype about the "Road to Dallas" and the final four in the 1986 NCAA national basketball tournament. While this event does provide entertainment for millions of people throughout the world, one is reminded that the performers are, in fact, college students. During the 1985 NCAA tournament, CBS broadcasters frequently commented on the success of one coach in graduating a reportedly high percentage of athletes who "stayed with him" throughout their undergraduate careers. What seemed implicit in their comments, was the suggestion that this was an unusually high graduation rate. The common sense view speculates that student-athletes in a big-time

program face such enormous demands on their time and effort that they have difficulties concentrating on their academic work. Based on this view, it would appear that student-athletes find it difficult to carry out their student role and indeed do encounter substantial role conflict. Mihalich (1982) and Brede and Camp (1982) each note the dual worlds of student-athletes and the corresponding demands faced by student-athletes from each of these worlds.

Another perspective addresses the theme of role conflict from a research perspective which focuses on the academic performances of student-athletes. There are two traditions within this perspective: the muckraking approach and the scholarly approach. Each has a lengthy history of examining the academic performances of student-athletes.

The muckrakers have highlighted incidences of weak academic performances (as well as other abuses) of student-athletes. Included in the muckraking tradition are the essays by Needham (1905), who discussed Yale University's tramp athlete, James D. Hogan, of the early 1900s; Meggysey (1971), who wrote of his student-athlete career; and Underwood (1980), who wrote of the general academic sham found in contemporary intercollegiate athletics. Additionally, numerous sports editors, ranging from local campus student newspaper sport editors to sport editors of major daily newspapers, have commented on the difficulties of being an athlete and a student in a big-time sports program.

The scholarly research approach examines the educational attainment record of student-athletes in a somewhat different manner. Scholars generally have attempted to systematically collect data across a sample of universities (NCAA, 1981) or across all athletes of a particular university (Larsen, 1973) to learn of the educational record of student-athletes. This tradition also has a rich history ranging from the literature review of Davis and Cooper (1934), who summarized the published research on the academic performances of student-athletes completed prior to 1934, to the more recent work of Purdy *et. al.* (1982), who examined the educational record of student-athletes at Colorado State University during a ten-year time span.

What is notable about the results of the work in each tradition is that it is difficult to provide a conclusive answer to the question of whether or not educational processes and educational outcomes are hindered as a result of athletic participation. Brede and Camp (1984) noted that:

Those who have read and reviewed athletic-academic achievement studies in the scholarly tradition have about as much reason to conclude that athletes do less well academically than other students as they do to conclude that athletes do somewhat better academically or, for that matter, to conclude that there appears to be no appreciable differences in academic achievement between athletes and other students.

This suggests that role conflict between the student and athlete roles may or may not exist. Rather than assuming that it exists, as is stated by certain authors, additional research is necessary to better understand the interaction between the roles of student and athlete. What follows is one attempt toward a clearer understanding of the concept of role conflict as it applies to male basketball and football players in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletic programs.

Status, Role, and Role Conflict

An analysis of role conflict involves an understanding of what is meant by the concepts of status and role. Each are basic concepts in the sociological analysis of the links between the individual and society (Gerth and Mills, 1953). What follows is a definition of key role analysis concepts and a theoretical overview of role conflict as it applies to the situation of student-athletes.

One place to begin this discussion is with the concepts of status and role. Typically, sociologists define status as "a socially defined position in a society" (Robertson, 1981:80). Roles are defined as "the set of prescriptions defining what the behavior of a position member should be" (Biddle and Thomas, 1966:29). As Ralph Linton suggested a number of years ago, a person *occupies* a status and *plays* a role associated with that status (Linton, 1936). Any one person can occupy numerous statuses and, correspondingly, play a number of roles. Some sociologists label this a person's role repertoire (McGee, 1977:138). As a result of occupying a number of statuses, a person may encounter or experience role conflict in that an individual may face "conflicting sets of legitimized role expectations such that complete fulfillment of both is realistically impossible" (Parsons, 1966:275). In such situations, the individual may have to develop strategies for resolving the conflicting expectations. For student-athletes, the typical example used to illustrate this point is the dilemma encountered by student-athletes who have to play an away game on the day an examination is scheduled by his/her professor. The usual way this is resolved is for the athlete to take the exam before leaving on the road trip (or more likely, upon returning), thereby eliminating the conflict. Such an example, while typical, and a common source of conflict for student-athletes, only touches the most superficial aspects of role conflict. To go beyond this level of analysis of role conflict, other components of role theory must be introduced.

Roles can be examined from the actor's viewpoint (in this case, the student-athlete's) and from the viewpoint of the other (the societally defined prescriptions). What this suggests, is that for the statuses of student and athlete, there are sets of expectations others hold for any incumbent of these statuses, (role expectations) and a set of expectations perceived by the incumbents of these statuses (role perceptions). These viewpoints may or may not coincide. That is, agreement may exist between role expectations

and role perceptions or there may be disagreements between the two. Interpretations are also made on role performances; that is, judgements are made on how well or how poorly incumbents carry out role expectations. Again, the incumbent and the other's judgement on the credibility of actual role performances may vary. Here, it is interesting to note, various levels of administrative control stipulate mandated minimal levels of academic performances for all student-athletes. For example, the NCAA stipulates minimal academic performance standards for athlete eligibility.

Finally, some sociologists have introduced the concept of master status as an important dimension of role analysis. A master status is that status (out of the several occupied by a person) which largely determines a person's social identity (Light and Keller, 1985:89). As noted by Light and Keller:

This may be an occupation that takes up most of a person's time and uses most of his or her energy (such as the presidency) or it may be a position of particular symbolic significance. ...For adults, occupation is usually most significant (Light and Keller, 1985:89).

A key point in the analysis of student-athlete role conflict is whether or not student-athletes have a master status, and if they do, is it the status of a student or is it the status of athlete. It is argued in this paper, that for role conflict to exist beyond the superficial level, student-athletes must view both roles as part of their master status. From the viewpoint of the other, what ought to be the master status is clear. Administrative bodies of intercollegiate athletics, university officials, coaches and others, proclaim that student-athletes are students first and athletes second. However, it is not clear that all student-athletes share this interpretation in the expected ordering of these two statuses. Additionally, it is not clear that the others (in particular, coaches) act in accordance within the publicly stated positions on their own ordering of these two statuses.

Drawing on the above discussion, it seems that from the viewpoint of the other, student-athletes are students first and athletes second; that there are clear minimal standards of expected outcomes for the student role; and, the recognition that there are times when the role of student and the role of athlete are in conflict. From the viewpoint of student-athletes however, there may be variations among role incumbents concerning their master status identity; that they may interpret the role expectations (perceptions) and their own performances in each role differently from the ones imposed upon them by these others. Aside from obvious time conflicts, role conflict may or may not exist. To be sure, considerable debate and discussion has centered on the academic performances of student-athletes and of the fit between these two statuses. However, there appears to be little research on how these two roles are perceived by student-athletes. What follows is an example of approaching questions of role conflict from the point of view of student-athletes.

Role Conflict: Athlete Viewpoints

A pilot study was undertaken to examine whether or not role conflict existed among different types of student-athletes. Data were gathered on student-athletes attending a NCAA Division I university.

The analysis begins with an examination of the educational performance of student-athletes. As noted, previous research on the education of student-athletes, whether focusing on GPAs or graduation rates, has not yielded clear-cut results. In part, this may be due to the manner in which the research question has been posed. Typically, student-athletes' educational performances are compared with those of student-non-athletes and/or the educational performances across different types of student-athletes (for example, football as opposed to golf, track or baseball players). Occasionally, as Purdy *et al.* (1982) have done, scholarship versus non-scholarship athletes are compared to one another. As a rule, all athletes are lumped together in any of these classifications. Brede and Camp (1984) have argued that different types of student-athletes undergo different educational experiences. To obtain these different types, each student-athlete that was certified to compete in football and men's basketball for the 1982-83 academic year was rated on his athletic ability by a member of the coaching staff and on his academic ability by the athletic department's academic counselor. Each of these variables was trichotomized, yielding nine conceptual categories. The educational experiences of these different types were then examined for one academic year. Data from this research indicated that some student-athletes do well academically (3.000 or better on a 4.0 scale), while others struggle (less than a 2.00). The data in Table 1 is used to illustrate this point.

Table 1

Academic Performances of Men's Basketball and Football Student-Athletes By Type of Student and By Type of Athlete

TYPES		SEMESTER							
		Fall '82				Spring '83			
Academic*	Athletic	Hours Attempted	Hours Passed	GPA	(N)	Hours Attempted	Hours Passed	GPA	(N)
Good	Good	13.3	13.0	3.430	(7)	15.3	15.3	3.222	(7)
Good	Average	14.5	14.4	3.143	(21)	14.4	14.2	3.192	(21)
Good	Weak	13.3	12.3	3.013	(3)	15.0	15.0	3.077	(3)

* of the 167 athletes on the teams at the beginning of the year, 31 (19%) were viewed by the academic counselor as "good" students.

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		Fall '82				Spring '83			
Athletic*	Academic	Hours Attempted	Hours Passed	GPA	(N)	Hours Attempted	Hours Passed	GPA	(N)
Good	Good	13.3	13.0	3.430	(7)	15.2	14.3	3.222	(7)
Good	Average	13.5	10.8	2.133	(27)	13.0	12.5	2.137	(22)
Good	Weak	13.6	7.1	1.791	(16)	13.6	10.9	2.104	(15)

* of the 167 athletes on the teams at the beginning of the year, 50 (30%) were viewed by the coaching staff as "good" college athletes.

Examining student-athletes who are judged as "good" students across the three categories of athletic ability, the data indicates consistent solid academic achievement in hours passed and GPA (3.00 or better). However, for student-athletes judged as "good" athletes, there is significant variation across the categories of academic ability in both GPAs and hours passed. Good athletes, rated average in academics, have GPAs just above 2.00 (C) and do not complete the required 24 hours of credit in two semesters. The academic performances of academically weak, but good athletes, indicates continuing eligibility problems. This type of student-athlete encounters semester after semester deficiencies in GPAs and hours passed.

What does this mean from a role conflict perspective concerning the meshing of these two roles? Based on externally imposed role expectations, in particular those of the NCAA, the conference and the local university, some athletes perform both roles beyond minimal expectations and others do not. While all student-athletes encounter time and energy conflicts between the two roles, some have developed strategies for resolving these conflicts and others have not. The students having academic difficulties are facing the most serious continuing conflicts. (It is interesting to note that more attention is directed toward athletes struggling with their academic roles rather than with "good" students struggling with their athletic careers.) Some argue that the way to resolve this problem is to raise the academic requirements in terms of initial and continuing eligibility. In other words, eliminate the academically weak student-athlete. To repeat however, this type of analysis views the situation from the viewpoint of the other and not from that of the student-athlete.

Student-athletes may hold a different interpretation or definition of the situation, based in part on how they define their own master status. The athletically talented but academically weak or even academically average student-athletes may in fact, define them as athletes and as students *only* in the sense that a 1.60 or 1.80 GPA and 24 hours in an academic year are necessary for continuing their athletic careers. If this is the case, then this type of athlete is not likely to experience role conflict between the role of student and athlete, since only one role, athlete, is salient. To be sure, a problem exists, but what is needed are hours or a higher GPA, which will be sought by

the most expeditious means available rather than concerns about getting a college degree. What is necessary to sort out these possibilities is research on how different types of student-athletes define themselves in relation to these two roles. While a transcript analysis provides certain information about student-athletes, it does not allow interpretations on how athletes define their world.

Several techniques can be used to learn how athletes perceive the roles of student and athlete. One is by the participant observation of student-athletes by persons working in each of the "two worlds" of intercollegiate athletics. One such person is the athletic academic advisor. Advisors have numerous occasions to chat with and observe student-athletes throughout their career and can frequently learn about what happened to "x" after he/she left the university. Concerning definitions of self, the academic athletic advisor at one university reported that the good athlete but weak student frequently discussed hopes and aspirations for a professional sport career. Often such athletes followed up on this by attending "rookie" tryout camps, however, rarely making the professional team. This category of athlete, after obtaining their final year of eligibility, frequently did not attend a single day in the classroom; rather, time was spent working out and pursuing the athletic role. This type generally left school immediately after the season ended. This is hardly a situation of role conflict. Counselors also interact with other types of student-athletes. The good student-good athlete type, for example was less likely to direct his energies toward a professional career, unless of course, he is a "world class" athlete. Rather, their self-definition was one of "I'm a student first and an athlete second," and they acted accordingly. That is, this type of student-athlete, while perhaps enjoying their intercollegiate sport career, envisioned an end to the athletic role and planned to further develop their career interests along the lines of their undergraduate major. Again, in this case, not much likelihood of role conflict in terms of identifying one's master status. The good athlete but average student type might be one type of student-athlete experiencing ongoing role conflicts. Another type might be student-athletes who are in the process of changing their master status, particularly athletes moving from a weak student to an average student situation. What is suggested, is that the academic counselor is well located within the university to gain insight into which type of athlete is experiencing role conflict in terms of the athlete's self-definition of who they are, what they want, where they are going and the likelihood of getting there.

For outsiders, such as sport sociologists, considerably fewer opportunities occur for such detailed observations into the daily worlds of student-athletes. Rather, a variety of research techniques need to be developed to learn how student-athletes define themselves and what accounts for these definitions. One technique is the use of the 20 question "Who am I" inventory. In our project, student-athletes were asked to provide 20 responses to the question "who am I" and to put the most important

responses first. Data drawn from the 20-statement inventory indicate that the weak student, good athlete type tended to focus on his athletic ability (I'm a football player, a hard hitter, a fast runner) and rarely on their status of student (I'm a business major or an undergraduate student). Other types of student-athletes, particularly the "good" student type, gave more visibility and a higher ranking to the student status and characteristics associated with this status (I'm an accounting major).

The use of autobiographies written by student-athletes is another technique that sheds light on the development of student and athletic statuses and the relative importance of each. Again, what is suggested, is that a variety of techniques can be utilized to learn what the two statuses mean and how they relate to one another from the perspective of student-athletes.

Conclusion

What this paper concludes is that for some student-athletes there are clear, direct paths between the campus library and the athletic locker room. For other athletes, the paths bypass one another. Further, it has been suggested that weak academic performances by student-athletes do create problems of eligibility, but do not necessarily indicate a situation of role conflict, at least as viewed by the student-athlete.

This paper also suggests that research needs to address the interplay of athletics and academics from the athlete's viewpoint and outlined ways of doing this. These are important issues in light of the continuing debate on the questionable academic record of some student-athletes and of the questionable practices of some universities in their recruitment and retention efforts on behalf of athletically talented, but academically weak students. To date, much of this debate has focused on what Ryan (1976) has labelled a "victim blaming" ideology. That is, the victims of a situation (in this case the student-athletes and/or the university) are blamed for questionable performance and practices; while the situation itself is not well understood.

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