

First Year Experiences of Collegiate Student-Athletes

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By

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## First Year Experiences of Collegiate Student-Athletes

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## Abstract

“First year Experiences of Collegiate Student-Athletes”

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The first year of a student-athletes experience can be a hard transition at any level. Many factors have to do with why first year student-athletes choose the path they take, anywhere from academic and social pressure, to physiological effects of playing at the next level, all of these factors are interconnected as to why a student-athlete chooses a certain school and an athletic program to be a part of.

The paper will be organized according to the following Table of Contents:

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

College athletics started in 1852; and the term student-athlete was introduced shortly after. With college athletics becoming popular, many schools saw athletics in a profitable way. That is the moment when student-athletes became a profit sign rather than a student that is looking for an education by the means of athletics.

The student-athlete compared to a traditional student has many more expectations placed on them during their college career. These range from all the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Division one to three. With the different expectations on all levels, this study will be analyzing how student-athletes are treated differently versus the traditional student. Second, how the first college year experiences differ from student-athletes to traditional students and what are the major differences of student-athletes have compared to non-athletes.

### Statement of the Problem

What differences are there between traditional college students and their student-athlete counterparts? Does the first year experiences of collegiate student-athletes affect their continuing of education? What are the differences between the traditional college students and the student-athletes regarding academics?

### Definition of Terms

Student-athlete: A participant in an organized competitive sport sponsored by the educational institution in which he or she is enrolled. (Watt & Moore III, 2001)

National Collegiate Athletic Association: A voluntary association of 1,281 institutions, conferences, organizations and individuals that organizes the athletic programs of many colleges and universities in the United States. (Underwood, 1984)

Academic Motivation: A predictor of academic performance for college students. (Gaston-Gayles, 2004)

### Method of Approach

A review of literature related to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence of the history of collegiate student-athletes in comparison to traditional college students will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will be made.

### Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted through Karmann libraries (University of Wisconsin-Platteville) over a period of time. By using surveys around campus some delimitations will include a small study body, lack of diversity within the University of Wisconsin-Platteville students and limited research participants. Primary searches will be conducted via Internet through EBSCO Host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite. Key search topics will include “Collegiate Student-Athletes,” “Education and Athletics,” and “Collegiate first year experiences.”

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

### **Adjusting to a New Life Style**

Starting a new experience in life can be exhilarating, when student-athletes make the leap from high school to college it can be a hard adjustment. According to Watt & Moore III, (2001) there are new life experiences that start when someone begins college such as harder academic loads, new social experiences, being away from home, and these experiences can have a major impact on how well someone can handle this new life style.

With the increasing pressures on college athletes by administration, media and the general public with the attitude of winning, it is hard for people to keep focused on why 18-22 year olds are playing these games. College coaches are focused on winning and getting their program to the next level, while student-athletes are paying attention to more than just athletics, they are taking the next step in life with college experiences. There is a time limit per week as stated by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) by law “17.1.6.1 Daily and Weekly Hour Limitations—Playing Season stating “student-athletes participation in countable athletically related activities shall be limited to a maximum of four hours per day and 20 hours per week” (NCAA, 2009). During a student-athlete’s sport is out of season, the participation requirements drops down to eight hours per week with athletic related actives according to the NCAA. A survey of over 1,200 student-athletes around the country stated that they worked on their sport on an average of 37 hours per week compared to their academics which was around 33 hours per week leading to an average of 70 hour per week time commitment for student-athletes (Potuto, 2007).

The long hours spent on academics and athletics makes it difficult for a first year student-athlete to gather his or her self and keep a focus on what will benefit their future. The first year of college is an adjustment period for many freshmen; many are a small fish in a large pond instead of being the big fish in the small pond they used to be at their high school. Playing time is decreased, and getting use to a new coaching staff can be critical in a student-athletes experience at the college level. At the University of Wisconsin-Platteville during the 2009 fall season there was one freshman that started on the football team, while the women's soccer program had four consistent starters compared to two on the men's soccer team. With the collegiate game being more physical and the necessary time needed to grow and learn the systems of the college game can be a great adjustment for any freshmen student-athlete (Pascarella, Ernest T., Louise Bohr, Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, 1995).

The physiological aspect of freshmen student-athletes compared to their older counterparts can be validated in a wide variety of physical aspects (Hunter, Gary R.; James Hilyer, Margaret A Forster, 1993). depending on the sport; the human body can only take so much. A freshman golf student-athlete is likely to see more playing time compared to a hockey upperclassmen because the human body is still forming when the student is entering college and therefore cannot withstand the physical requirements of the sport. The upperclassmen have had the opportunity to begin a strength program and off-season work outs to get their body where it needs to be for their season (Hunter, Gary R.; James Hilyer, Margaret A Forster, 1993). As a first year student-athlete enters college many are overwhelmed at how big some of their teammates are and how much faster the games are being played at. Very seldom are freshmen called upon early in the season to contribute for their teams, especially when the sport is a physical one like

football, hockey, wrestling or basketball. The physiological aspect has to do a lot with playing time, if you are not there physically then it is hard to see the playing field (Hunter, Gary R.; James Hilyer, Margaret A Forster, 1993).

The mental side of learning how to play college athletics can be a challenge. For example, learning formations and schemes that coaches implement, and educating yourself on the other team's personnel can make the mental side take hours of preparation. Determining how an opposing team plans to approach the competition are all factors that play in to preparation for a student-athlete though film viewing. Sam Maniar, a sports psychologist at Ohio State University believes "the mental health aspect of sports psychology is significant because off-the-field problems can affect on-the-field performance. More important, a sports psychologist can give athletes a coping mechanism for the pressure of college life" (Murphy, 2006). It's not just the mental side of the game that impacts players, the everyday tasks that come with playing the sport can have a compounding affect on the athlete. In 2006, there were estimated to be over 30 division one schools that employed a sports psychologist to help student-athletes deal with the psychological aspects of playing collegiate sports (Murphy, 2006).

The extra pressures that are associated with a normal college experience also factor into the pressures of being a student-athlete and these can be difficult to balance with the sport time commitments a student-athlete has. Most colleges and universities have a housing rule where freshmen are required to stay in residential living quarters, which helps students become familiar with the campus and meet other freshmen. A normal class load for students are between 12- 18 credit hours and for every hour spent in class it is suggested a student spends two hours outside

of class on that subject. A student-athlete is supposed to spend 36-54 hours on academics, along with the average of 37 hours spent on athletics (Potuto, 2007). Amid all of these hours spent on just two activities it is hard for the student-athletes to blend their new life style of being away from home and gaining new experiences. Time management is a key asset to learn and obtain, while the student-athlete spends fewer hours in a classroom compared to their high school years, the addition of preparing for their sport can make being a student-athlete a full time job.

The social aspect can be an exciting time for freshmen; there are many new experiences, new people, learning about professors, and trying to find ones way around campus, plus adjusting to not having parents around and choosing ones day to day activities is another step into adulthood (Sperber, 2001). Once you are on a college campus and have those responsibilities of being a student-athlete one cannot have all the same behaviors of the common students on campus. Although it seems that student-athletes are still being pulled in to drinking, a survey done by Core Institute (2010) stated that:

- Among college students under the age of 21, 82 percent report using alcohol within the past year and 69 percent report using alcohol within the last 30 days.
- Seventy-eight percent of college athletes report that they used alcohol on at least one occasion in the past 30 days prior to completing the Core survey.
- One in five athletes believe others students drinking adversely affects their involvement on an athletic team.
- Student athletes are more often the heaviest drinkers in the overall student population. Half of college athletes are binge drinkers. College athletes are also more likely than

other students to say that getting drunk is an important reason for drinking.

According to the Core Institutes research, drinking seems to be a problem with student-athletes especially on nights after games and when student-athletes have days off.

Adjusting to a new life style can be difficult, being away from home and taking the next step in life is an enormous adjustment, whether it's dealing with new coaches, difference in playing time, physiological and the mental side of college athletics. Furthermore, the social side of being a student-athlete seems to bring more pressure and an increasing of drinking with playing a sport.

### **Academic Pressure**

The college academic world is a huge step from what high school students are used to. College teachers are less likely to remind one of assignments, or what you need to hand in, and most of your classes are now located in multiple building compared to just one building. The NCAA has placed an emphasis on academics over the past 37 years. Since the 2.0 Rule came to be in 1973 requiring student-athletes to have a 2.0 grade point average (GPA) to be eligible for a scholarship and be allowed to play intercollegiate athletics this guideline may build extra pressure and anxiety for a student-athlete to remain eligible or keep a scholarship. Due to the demands of practices, travel time, and the possibility of missing classes due to competition, a student-athlete's course schedule has a major impact on the student-athlete ability to maintain balance of the academic pressures and the amount of college life experiences a student-athlete can have while at college (Watt & Moore III, 2001).

In order to receive acceptance into the college or university, a student-athlete's GPA is not the only thing that colleges look at when one goes through their screening process.

Universities and colleges take a look at the applying students class rank, GPA, and test scores on the American College Testing (ACT) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Underwood, 1984). By having a 2.0 GPA does qualifies the student-athlete for financial aid and to participate in intercollegiate athletes, but doesn't automatically grant them access entrance in to the school.

Since academics has become more of a focus of the NCAA and entrance into a school, there have become more points of interest from the schools that a student-athlete needs to be eligible for financial aid and be academically eligible for participation in athletics before enrollment. During their academic years at the school, the student-athlete needs to complete a minimum of 16 (for Division I) or 14 (for Division II) core courses. Core classes are defined as English, Math, foreign language, social studies and science classes with an emphasis on college preparation. The requirement for core classes started in 1986 with Proposition 48 (Underwood,1984). These rules do not apply to Division III student-athletes, because Division III is considered to be more academically focused schools compared to Division I or II. I researched five schools starting with the University of Michigan, and Coastal Carolina University at the Division I level, Barry University and University of Central Oklahoma from Division II and Hanover College from Division III. The research stats indicate that the number of students decreased in class size at every school, while GPA's and test scores increased. The required number of core classes increased from Division I schools to Division III, even though the NCAA does not require Division III student-athletes to have a set amount, the colleges on their own have a set requirement.

Besides having a higher standards of entrance for student-athletes by having governance like the NCAA, student-athletes already are subjected to different standards than students just applying to the respected college or university. Academic motivation is essential to having a successful career off the field. A student-athlete often requires travel and missing classes to represent their schools. Many schools offer assistance to their student-athletes mostly in Division I, but Division II and III have options like tutoring services or note takers while missing class for their student-athletes. Many Division I schools have a staff member that oversees their student-athletes academic performance such as Michigan State's program includes academic counseling, computer labs, tutoring, career planning, community service opportunities, personal development workshops, assisting in monitoring athletic eligibility (Michigan State, 2010). These kinds of programs are becoming more of a common place for student-athletes to help them achieve success while attending school.

### **Academic Motivation**

Academic motivation can have a big impact on how a student-athlete approaches his or her school work. A study done by Gaston-Gayles in 2004 stated:

“The most interesting result from this study was the significance of academic motivation in the model. Academic motivation, regardless of athletic motivation, is important in determining future academic success...whereas a students' level of academic motivation did make a difference... Further, the findings from this study do not concur with previous studies which suggest that

athletic motivation or the desire to pursue a professional athletic career detracts from academic success.”

Even though this information was collected from a Division I school, it could be suggested that academic motivation is a driving force for many student-athletes across the United States. Many universities and colleges have a variety of majors to choose from, they range from what are considered easier majors to some of the top level majors. Students have the options to choose from any major that their school offers, and it depends on what the student wants to gain from the education system (DeVenzio, 1986). Student-athletes may be likely to choose a less difficult major in order to play a sport out of fear of not remaining eligible.

While deciding what career choices are ahead of themselves, students must think about what classes to take to help them gain the knowledge for that career. Priority scheduling has become more relevant with Division I and II student-athletes. Priority scheduling is allowing student-athletes the opportunity to register for the courses they need at the times requested before the non-student athletes which should enable an athlete to stay on a steady graduation plan (Pascarella, Ernest T., Louise Bohr, Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, 1995). Many teams around the country hold practices from mid-afternoon to early evening requiring student-athletes to have this time free to allow them to practice, hence why student-athletes need to have priority scheduling (Pascarella, Ernest T., Louise Bohr, Amaury Nora, Patrick T. Terenzini, 1995). However there are many skeptics on why schools have these regulations for student-athletes, some believe it is for student-athletes to have the first opportunity to gain entrance into the easier classes on campus (Nishimoto, 1997). This could be true for some of the student-athletes on

campus, but those classes are open to all students soon after student-athletes register and are mostly filled to capacity. Once again it's about the motivation of a student-athlete that attends a school and what direction he or she wants their studies to go that determines their willingness to expand and spend extra time on academics (Potuto, 2007).

A survey done by Josephine Potuto (2007) entitled "National Study of Student-Athletes Regarding their Experiences as College Students," one specific area explored the academic behaviors of student-athletes. The survey was conducted with 18 Division IA (major football programs) student-athletes. Student-athletes were asked "what was your primary reason for choosing your major" with 83% responding "reason unrelated to athletics" while 13% reported athletics did have a reason for the major they choose. Potuto also asked the student athletes how athletic participation has influenced them with the student-athletes stating that developing leadership skills, time management skills, and the ability to take responsibility for yourself receiving a score of 93% respectively, while study skills received 79%. These skills were perceived as positive impacts of being a student-athlete and how it has helped them develop. Participation within college athletics, many studies have found that the student-athlete GPA is higher than that of their counterparts that focus on school (Watt & Moore III, 2001). The assessment of college athletics have revealed that the benefits of participating in college sports has a greater impact on one's life than not participating at all.

### **Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations**

In summary, this paper was intended to explore the first year experiences of student-athletes, and then recommend further research on the topic of first year student-athletes. Much of the past research compiled on this topic tended toward the racial aspects of student-athletes and the academic world. When exploring the topic of first year experiences of student-athletes it became evident that there was plenty of past research on the topic.

This paper researched literature with topics pertaining to first year experiences of college and first year experiences of student-athletes. Student-athletes seem to be under more pressure than the traditional student in the academic sense with all the time restraints that are placed on them. Student-athletes are continuously busy with their academic schedules, athlete commitments and other personal obligations. The NCAA has placed extra academic pressure on student-athletes with requirements to gain entrance into college as well. Plus, if one choose to join a college or university at a lower competition level, requirements to join that school increase by GPA, high school courses taken and ACT or SAT scores.

The student-athlete additionally receives extra academic help at the high competition level colleges and universities. One common factor for most student-athletes is the advantage of priority scheduling. This is a great advantage for student-athletes since they do have many time commitments, their scheduling can help them with fitting practice into the academic life's. When thinking about classes some student-athletes need extra motivation. That academic motivation can drive student-athletes to reach their peaks in the academic world, it can be hard sometimes to keep focus on academics when there are so many other commitments. Conclusions of this

research indicate that further research is needed to conclude the whole experience of first year student-athletes and their role within the university or college setting.

It is recommended that further research be compiled about the topic of first year experiences of student-athletes. This research could help administrators and coaches at the collegiate level find a basis of why first year student-athletes make the choices they make, like choosing a college, participating in an athletic or academic program. College athletics has a serious money factor, from Division I which spends millions of dollars a year to a Division III school which spends hundreds of thousands of dollars on athletics. Getting in the mind of a first year student-athlete is difficult and the challenges they face compared to that of their student counterpart can raise difficulties. These difficulties can range from their time management, traveling, game preparation, all the extra daily tasks that student-athletes must accomplish that the traditional students do not.

The obstacles that student-athletes face with time management, social pressure, academic pressure and the physiological aspect of college athletics can be a daunting task. Nevertheless, there still needs to be more scholarly research done in all of these fields concerning all of college athletics not just the first year experience of student-athletes. In summary, it is recommended that there be further research be conducted concerning first year experiences with student-athletes. Research conducted exploring the motivating factors of first year student-athletes is highly recommended.

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