

Academic Performance of College Athletes: A Conceptual Framework

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Criticism of a lack of academic integrity in college athletics has gained attention as incidents of academic misconduct have been made public and since the Students Right-to-Know Act became law in November 1990 ("College Athletic Scandals Erupt Nationwide," 2003; Suggs, 2003; The Drake Group, 2006). The law requires higher education institutions that received federal funds to publish graduation rates of college athletes, as well as overall institutional graduation rates. The data reflect the problems of academic achievement in athletics and have prompted the NCAA to address the issue. In August 2005, the NCAA implemented a reformed academic package that penalizes teams not on course to achieving a 50 percent graduation rate. The need to improve academic performance of college athletes is now not only an ethical issue, but also a financial concern.

The purpose of this study was to build a conceptual framework to examine academic performance of college athletes. The framework was based on Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) student integration model and previous research. Components of Tinto's model include social integration, academic integration, and institutional commitment. Tinto's model suggests individuals interact within the institution's environment resulting in academic and social integration. The level of academic and social integration of an individual contributes to their ensuing institutional commitment and ultimately the individual's academic success. Researchers have found empirical support for Tinto's model (Braxton, Vesler, & Hossler, 1995; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990).

Tinto's model was developed to examine academic performance of traditional students and although college athletes can be considered traditional, research indicates otherwise. Research suggests college athletes' academic integration differs from traditional student integration due to stereotypical attitudes towards college athletes, especially in academic performance (McHugh & Sedlacek, 1991). Moreover, it has been suggested that coach recommendations, even informal comments, pressure athletes (Bickford, 1999). Because coaches are influential figures in the lives of their athletes, they may be key figures in the academic success of their college athletes.

The conceptual framework developed in this study to examine college athletes' academic success included three components based on Tinto's model: team social integration, coach academic integration, and athletic commitment. Team social integration is the extent an athlete connected socially to their respective team. Coach academic integration includes academic interactions of coaches with athletes. Athletic commitment includes the athlete's dedication to their athletic team rather than solely the institution.

An application of the developed framework may provide college athletic departments and researchers insight into student persistence of college athletes. Athletic departments may better identify athletes at risk of leaving an institution. Moreover, the character of a team as a whole may be identified and used to predict a team academic success rate similar to the academic progress rate (APR). The APR is the principle element from which the NCAA determines if a team is subject to penalties under the reformed academic package.