

A Qualitative Analysis of Variables That Contribute to the Academic Success of Freshmen Student-Athletes at a Football Championship Subdivision University

Lori L. Braa, University of Mount Union

Abstract 2012-256

Socio-cultural Saturday, May 26, 2012 8:55 AM

20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (North)

Few topics in higher education are more debated than intercollegiate athletics. Issues such as amateurism, professionalism, and the academic abuses of athletes and coaches, keep college athletics in the headlines. Over 400,000 student-athletes participate in intercollegiate athletics at all three Divisions within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). However, Division I receives the greatest criticism and attention within the media and in higher education. Most of this attention revolves around graduation rates, educational development and learning, and time commitment devoted to athletics (Crowley, 2006). Although the concern has been an issue for over 80 years, the relationship between athletic participation and academic success continues to be scrutinized in the media and in higher education (McTeer & Curtis, 1990).

Although many student-athletes are able to adjust to the rigors of higher education, a growing number of freshmen student-athletes are challenged in maintaining their grade point averages (GPA). Many of these students do not enter college prepared for the academic rigor; with their time commitments to athletics, they have less opportunity to devote the time needed for academic success (Browne, Cunningham, Gruber, & McGuire, 1995; Clark, Floyd, & Alford, 1986). These issues provide a unique challenge for student-athletes and further emphasize the need for academic support. Student-athletes come from various backgrounds that influence their transitional experience. Because of these various backgrounds, some student-athletes do not always adapt within the standard program an athletic department utilizes (Hill, 1993; Tracey & Corlett, 1995).

Predictors of college success have often been based on cognitive factors such as high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores (Ervin, Saunders, Gillis, & Hogrebe, 1985; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufrang, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Growing research supports the use of non-cognitive factors in addition to traditional cognitive measures to predict academic success (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Non-academic variables (social and emotional adjustment and institutional attachment) more accurately predict college adjustment than academic variables. Non-cognitive factors—a sense of belonging, positive attitude toward peer relationship, interactions with faculty, and social integration—influence student persistence (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Petrie & Russell, 1995). Further, when non-cognitive variables are combined with high school GPA and standardized tests, predictions of success are more accurate (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). This study examined non-cognitive variables in combination with cognitive variables as they relate to academic success, specifically those who were successful in their secondary education but who failed to adjust to the academic rigor of college. A growing number of quantitative studies are using assessment questionnaires such as the Non-Cognitive Questionnaire (NCQ; Sedlacek & Adams-Gast, 1992) and the Student-Athletes’ Motivation Toward Sports and Academics Questionnaire (SAMSAQ; Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Sedlacek & Adams-Gast, 1992; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). These quantitative tools have accurately studied the relationship between non-cognitive variables and academic performance. However, there is scant qualitative research addressing cognitive and non-cognitive variables of freshmen student-athletes and how they relate to academic success.

Qualitative research seeks to explain why and uncover meaning in an effort to understand a phenomenon. This study employed qualitative research methods to understand the influences and factors of a students’ academic success.

Perceptions from five sophomore student-athletes were elicited as they reflected on their freshmen year. Three male and two female student-athletes, who came from a variety of sports, ethnicities, and backgrounds served as the research participants of this study. Four one hour face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted over a five week period of time. Pre-determined, open-ended questions were developed to guide the conversation, allowing for flexibility in seeking clarification or exploring their thoughts more thoroughly. In addition to interviews, data were collected from artifacts such as high school transcripts, standardized test scores, freshmen year grades, NCAA clearinghouse documents, and field notes recorded after each of the four interview. After analysis of the twentieth interview it was determined that saturation had been reached (e.g., based on repetition of a majority of the themes);
therefore, no further interviews were needed.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection and was ongoing throughout the interview process. The analysis technique used in this case study followed the research procedures detailed by Kvale (1996). Interviews were transcribed and condensed into shorter formulations. Kvale (1996) termed these shorter formulations as natural meaning units. The next stage consisted of interrogating the meaning units in terms of themes as they related to the specific questions and purpose of the study. Two independent investigators also analyzed the transcriptions searching for emerging themes.

Triangulation is salient to validating credibility in qualitative studies and involves the use of multiple data collection methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation was achieved by analyzing interview transcripts, field notes, demographic questionnaires completed by the participants and archived material such as high school GPA, standardized test scores, and other material collected from the athletic department. Peer review, member review, and an audit trail were also used for this study.

The analysis of the data revealed four universal themes: the transitional experience from high school to college, unpreparedness from high school, athletic demands, and social adjustment, as contributors to the participants’ academic success in their freshman year.

In conclusion, this presentation will discuss and analyze the significance of the study’s findings as well as provide practical and theoretical implications for athletic practitioners and higher education professionals. The college experience for students comes during a challenging time in a person’s life. The first year of college presents an opportunity for positive intervention to those who are confronted with the transition into higher education. From an institutional standpoint with increasing pressure to attract and retain students, it is critical to gain a rich, first person account of the freshmen lived experience. Once an understanding is gained of the salient variables that contribute to quality intercollegiate experiences, appropriate steps can be taken to proactively structure and organize these experiences in a manner that best positions student-athletes to reap the benefits of academic and sports participation.