

The Feeling is Mutual: Academic Advisors Perceptions of Student-Athletes

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Student-athletes are a population with special needs and unusual pressures, and the needs expressed by student-athletes are different than those of their non-athlete peers (Gayles, 2009; Papanikolaou et al., 2003). There is a great deal of importance in ensuring the eligibility of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) student-athletes and universities have utilized campus resources to assist in continuing eligibility efforts. Student-athletes have advising and counseling resources available to all students but also academic centers devoted strictly to athletics. So, in many cases they have an academic advisor in their chosen major but also an academic counselor housed within the athletic department. To ensure transparency and compliance of NCAA rules some institutions (i.e. Oklahoma, Texas A&M, and Tennessee) have the athletic academic support centers under the supervision of the university provost. In accordance with this effort, both athletic academic advisors as well as academic advisors on campus dually advise most student-athletes. The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of academic advisors toward the student-athletes population. Specifically, (R1) how do academic advisors perceive intercollegiate athletics on their respective campus and (R2) how do athletic advisors perceive student-athletes?

Previous research has focused on how student-athletes feel faculty and staff perceive them, as well as how faculty and non-athletes perceive student-athletes. Student-athletes have been identified as being “dumb jocks,” and based on that perception student-athletes are held to low academic standards (Burke, 1993; Preacco, 2009; Watt & Moore, 2001). Student-athletes are aware of how they are perceived, but do not feel that these stereotypes depict them as an individual (Jackson, Brown, Brown, & Manul, 2002). A study of undergraduate students perceptions of student-athletes revealed that non-athletes believe that student-athletes lack intelligence, and enroll in a less than challenging curriculum to ensure they are eligible for athletic competition (Sailes, 1996). Faculty members often express negativity towards student-athletes out of resentment due to the special treatment student-athletes are given in regards to admissions and academic support (Balcom & Lantz, 2001). Other studies have revealed that faculty members at NCAA Division I member institutions appear not to be as satisfied with the intercollegiate athletics program on their respective campuses when compared to those at Division II and III institutions (Cockley & Roswal, 1994; Norman, 1995). However, despite the fact that most intercollegiate student-athletes are required to meet with an academic advisor, studies have failed to address how academic advisors perceive the sub-population of the students that they are advising.

To better understand the how and why academic advisors perceive student-athletes (both positively and negatively), Intergroup Contact Theory informed the study (Allport, 1954). This framework focuses on the idea that beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are interconnected, and within constructive environment professional interaction will result in positive progress (Allport, 1954). Often, the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals or groups are associated with the understanding (or failing to understand) specific subject matter (Connolly, 2000; Miller, 2002; Tovar, 2011). In order to best measure academic advisors perceptions of student-athletes, the Perceptions About Athletic Department Questionnaire (PADQ) and Stereotype About Student-Athletes Questionnaire (SASQ) were utilized (Lawrence, Hendricks, & Ott, 2007). Each questionnaire was developed by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2007), and consisted of 12 questions measured on a six-point Likert-type scale. Each instrument was modified to gather the perceptions of academic advisors rather than faculty members. Questionnaires were sent to members of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), a professional organization of more than 10,000 members whose primary responsibility is to provide academic advising.

Understanding how academic advisors perceive student-athletes allows athletic administrators to assist in filling the gaps between the athletic department and the institution; thus, ensuring the academic needs of the student-athlete are met. As such, a corporative effort within the campus community can ensure the academic growth and ultimately academic success of student-athletes. By better understanding how academic advisors perceive student-athletes,

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attitude transformations can possibly occur, leading to positive thoughts surrounding student-athletes and increasing the understanding of this population.