Integrating Athletics within the Academy: Educational Experiences of Athletes, Musicians, and Traditional Students

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Housing varsity athletics within the academy has largely been based upon the theoretical notion that athletics is an element of education that can attract and build disciplined well-rounded students (Ingrassia, 2012; Putney, 2009), foster town-gown relations, and provide an avenue to facilitate publicity for the university (Ingrassia, 2012; Oriard, 2012). These foundational assumptions merging athletics and the academy have been a source of tension and topic of debate through each developmental era of the college sport enterprise (Desrochers, 2013; Oriard, 2001; Smith 2011; Thelin, 1996).

Despite the philosophical and financial union of athletics and the academy for over 150 years, within the United States, the tangible organizational integration of education through athletics has never been evident beyond statements of vision, marketing efforts, and financial streams (Meyer, 2008; NCAA, 2014; Southall et al., 2011; Huml, Svensson, & Hancock, 2014; Weight & Cooper, 2015; Weight, Cooper, & Popp, 2015). Consequently, athletics has become viewed as “extracurricular,” “non-academic,” or “a detractor” from the educational mission of the academy (Benford, 2007; Gerdy, 2006; Zimbalist, 1999). Building upon this notion, a growing body of literature and litigation has condemned the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and its actors, for exploitation of its athletes (Elinson, 2013; McCormick & McCormick, 2006; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Zimbalist, 1999); excessive spending (Anthes, 2010; Drape & Thomas, 2010); and facilitation of a media circus that detracts from the mission of higher education (Benford, 2007; Duderstadt, 2003; Sperber, 2000).

There are also concerns about intercollegiate athletics breeding an unhealthy environment for the academic development of athletes. This unhealthy environment includes pressure to gravitate towards less rigorous majors (Fountain & Finley, 2009, 2011), athletic personnel placing priorities of athletics over academics (Huml, Hancock & Bergman, 2014), and athletes having little or no voice in their course selection (Hardin & Pate, 2013; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2011). The time commitment required by athletes to their sport is likely one of the primary reasons for these pressures. Supporting data collected through the NCAA GOALS study found the average weekly academic and athletic time commitment to be just under 80 hours/week (Hainline, 2015).

Reform-centric arguments have been tempered by literature supporting athletics as a unique element of holistic education (Adler & Adler, 1991; Bonfiglio, 2011; Bowen & Levin, 2003; Brand, 2006; Lapchick, 1987). Specific positive educational outcomes from intercollegiate athletics participation have been documented including occupational marketability (Chalfin, Weight, Osborne, & Johnson, 2015; Shulman & Bowen, 2011), enhanced personal self-concept (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gaston-Gayles & Hu, 2009), cognitive development (Chaddock et al., 2011; Rosewater, 2009), and a multiplicity of skills directly relevant to success in life after athletics (Center for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2010; Henderson, Olbrecht, & Polacheck, 2006; Long & Caudill, 1991; Ryan, 1989; Soshnick, 2013; Williams, 2013).

While the philosophical debate between cohorts of reformers and supporters has been sustained through each era of collegiate sport, only incremental changes have been enacted—largely in the form of regulatory standards imposed by the NCAA (Oriard, 2001; Smith, 2001; Smith 2011). An alternative inside-out approach to reform was delineated by Myles Brand, former president of Indiana University (1994-2002) and the NCAA (2002-2005) (Brand, 2006; Weight, Cooper, & Popp, 2015). Brand advocated for recognition of the educational value of intercollegiate athletic participation and an integrated view of intercollegiate athletics within the academy. He decried the undervalued treatment of athletics, and condemned the view that athletics is an auxiliary to the university, unworthy of subsidy (Brand, 2006). To overcome this bias, Brand suggested an integrated approach to intercollegiate athletics, wherein athletics would be treated as an academic unit similar to the performing arts (Keene, 2009; Smith, 1962). Brand theorized if such a philosophical and structural paradigm shift were to occur, the competitive pressure and associated
detriments to the system would lessen. Further, the educational foundation of intercollegiate athletics could resurface as the fundamental purpose of athletics within higher education (Bowen & Levin, 2003; Brand, 2006; Weight, 2015; Weight, Cooper & Popp, 2015).

An important element of reform discussion, that has not yet been explored, is the structural and philosophical elements of athletics, art/music, and traditional academic fields that facilitate unique or similar student educational pathways (Schneider & Klotz, 2000). This study addresses this critical gap in the literature. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to examine the educational experiences of junior and senior undergraduate athletes, music majors, and traditional students related to schedule, career aspirations, and career preparation in order to explore similarities and differences between the populations and provide additional perspective to the proposed reform model (Brand, 2006) integrating athletics within the academy.

In order to facilitate inquiry into this purpose, we utilized a mixed-methods research design through the use of survey to facilitate qualitative insights into an exploratory phenomenon, while also gathering quantitative data to compare with previously gathered metrics, regulations, and anecdotal evidence (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). Due to the exploratory nature of the research, an instrument was developed by the authors and reviewed by a panel of experts (n = 9) representing uniquely relevant contributions. Pilot testing with samples of athletes (n = 11), musicians (n = 9), and traditional students (n = 7) yielded test-retest reliability with alpha levels above .80 on all quantitative items included within the study. The survey was distributed online via Qualtrics software to a stratified-random sample of junior and senior athletes, a random sample of traditional students, and listserv distribution convenience sample of music students all drawn from five of the top-25 ranked music and athletics institutions. The survey was completed by n = 257 (29.3%) athletes, n = 124 (19.6%) traditional students, and n = 109 (23.9%) music students. Analysis involved open and axial coding by independent reviewers, analysis of variance, and descriptive statistics.

Results reveal data supporting shared experiences between music students and athletes, unique from traditional students. This data supports the conceptual framework of an integrated organizational approach to intercollegiate athletics (Brand, 2006; Weight et al., 2015) by providing evidence of academic similarities between musicians and athletes. By understanding the educational experiences of our traditional students, athletes, and musicians, we can facilitate dialogue, uncover barriers, and utilize existing pathways that are effective in an effort to enhance educational experiences and explore the potential for true integration of athletics within the academy.