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The Athlete–Student Dilemma

*Exploring the Experiences of Specially Admitted Student–Athletes
at a Division III University*

Sean Patrick Hendricks
Ane Turner Johnson

Abstract

In higher education, it is the responsibility of institutional leaders to ensure the success of all students (Tinto, 1993), even those who failed to meet general admission requirements. This case study explored the challenges associated with enrolling student–athletes at a Division III institution with less than desirable admission standards (Stake, 1995). This study examined 199 specially admitted student–athletes that enrolled at Rowan University between 2007 and 2011 and found that a lack of support and proper programming has placed this population in a disadvantageous position. This coupled with student engagement that was found to further isolate student–athletes from the rest of campus, have contributed to a lack of academic success from many in this population. To better serve the needs of this population, Rowan University could implement a support program to assist this group as it navigates its educational pathways. This support program would include hiring professionals to track and mentor this population as it transitions from high school to college-level academics. Additionally, the institution could increase communication between the athletic department and advising center to better serve the academic needs of this population.

Keywords: *Division III athletics, student engagement, and specially admitted student-athletes*

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Debates regarding the role athletics plays in college currently dominate headlines. Originally designed to add to the experience of the student–athlete and overall student body, athletic programs were devised to supplement students’ education and experience (Smith, 2005). When juxtaposed with today’s highly publicized billion-dollar industry of college athletics, it has become increasingly clear that the halcyon days of athletics simply adding to the college experience of the student body are a distant memory. Issues of pay for play (Berri, 2013), cheating scandals, and academic fraud (Delsohn, 2014; Ganim, 2014) plague today’s college athletic programs. Moreover, pundits often assert those athletic programs, and the affiliated institution, for financial reasons, exploit student–athletes and leave them with little hope of obtaining a degree for their efforts (Ganim, 2014).

The controversy, and subsequent discourse, surrounding college athletics pertains mostly to students and athletic programs at the Division I level. Indeed, student–athletes at this level face myriad issues that complicate their college experience. Attempting to juggle the arduous schedule of athletics, while also managing the rigors of college academics is a dichotomy that makes the completion of an academic degree program challenging. However, this predicament is also present for another group of student–athletes that may have more difficulty with completion due to a lack of institutional support. These students participate at the Division III level and are underrepresented in the world of academia, even though they comprise the largest amount of student–athletes (NCAA, 2014).

The research involving student–athletes at the Division I level is extensive; however, very few studies address the phenomenon of student–athletes participating at the Division III level (Robst & Keil, 2000). Division III athletic programs are not permitted to offer athletic scholarships, nor are they required to report graduation rates for student–athletes (NCAA, 2014). Unfortunately, for those at the Division III level, there has been little exploration of how these student–athletes navigate their academic experiences, and even less examination of students who failed to qualify for general admission and required a special admit to enroll at a particular institution (Robst & Keil, 2000). The study described here was designed to address this gap. Our purpose was to explore the challenges of student–athletes at the Division III level that failed to meet the general admission standards.

Conceptual Framework

A major catalyst for the successful completion of a college degree is the interaction a student has with the campus environment. A highly involved student has a greater likelihood of completing a degree (Astin, 1985; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1975). Three important theories are critical for understanding college student success. These theories revolve around the concepts of involvement, engagement, and integration. The concepts are unique and often used interchangeably, even though each has a distinct meaning. Deciphering the differences in each theory is

important for understanding best practices (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Involvement theory revolves around the time students spend studying, completing homework, and collaborating with classmates. It also accounts for time students spend working and living on campus, participating in clubs, and socializing with friends (Astin, 1999; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Involvement is an essential component for student development because it involves formal and informal modes of learning. Tinto (1997) states, “the greater students’ involvement in the life of the college, especially in academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills” (p. 600).

Engagement theory is used to explain the interaction a student has with educationally related activities established by the institution (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella, 1985; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Engagement differs from involvement in that it places a greater onerous burden on the institution (Tinto, 1988; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Kuh (2009) defines student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). The student has the responsibility to partake in educationally stimulating activities, but the responsibility of engaging students and fostering authentic learning lies with the institution. Engagement activities include passport programs, common reading programs, lecture series, department workshops, and career fairs. Engagement forces institutions to develop and implement stimulating educational practices (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

The last theory is integration and is defined by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) as “the extent to which students come to share the attitudes and beliefs of their peers and faculty and the extent to which students adhere to the structural rules and requirements of the institution-the institutional culture” (p. 414). Integration for college students involves becoming a member within the institutional community. Tinto’s (1993) theory of integration emphasizes how important it is for students to integrate into formal and informational academic systems, as well as formal and informal social systems.

The three theories are critical for understanding student success and the various factors impacting educational outcomes (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Both the student and institution play a central role in the educational experiences that students have with the campus community (Astin, 1985; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1993). As such, student persistence is a shared responsibility.

One group presenting additional challenges for colleges is the group of student-athletes that enroll each year. Student-athletes are a unique group in that they have academic and social demands different from the typical student (Watt & Moore, 2001).

Persistence and the Student-Athlete

A student’s academic development is a direct function of the time spent advancing educational talents (Astin, 1985). For student-athletes, so much of their

energy is focused on the practice and game field, developing athletic talents, often leaving little time to develop academic talents (Ayers, Pazmino-Cevallos, & Dohose, 2012; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Person & LeNoir, 1997; Watt & Moore, 2001). Student–athletes face additional challenges because of the time commitments associated with college athletics. In addition to classes, social activities, and studying, student–athletes have additional athletic demands, including exercising and weightlifting, practicing, participating in games, travel, team meetings, team meals, and various other team functions (Ayers et al., 2012; Person & LeNoir, 1997; Watt & Moore, 2001). Participating in athletics limits the amount of time available for completing assignments and studying for exams. As a result, student–athletes have increased academic, social, physical, personal, and emotional challenges (Jolly, 2008; Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

Understandably, Division I studies outweigh the available research on student–athletes (Tobin, 2005). There are similarities between student–athletes among the divisions; however, Division III student–athletes are different from those at the Division I level. Division I and II colleges and universities have the ability to offer full-athletic scholarships, whereas the NCAA prohibits Division III institutions from offering financial aid based on athletic performance (NCAA, 2014). Many Division I and II colleges and universities hire academic professionals to aid student athletes; however, because of financial constraints, many Division III schools are unable to hire these same professionals (Holsendolph, 2006). Often, Division III student athletes enroll with similar scores as those at the Division I and II level, but do not receive the same academic guidance and support (Holsendolph, 2006).

Higher education institutions have an obligation to implement policies and practices to ensure the academic success of all students (Astin, 1985; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1993). This is a daunting task, as students are uniquely different, presenting new challenges. Especially taxing for institutions are the students that participate in varsity athletics (Sigelman, 1995). If the primary objective is to ensure the academic success of all students, institutions need to understand the complexities that student athletes endure, and implement supportive programs and policies to aid their academic development.

The Division III Student–Athlete

In August 1973, the NCAA passed legislation separating institutions that offer athletic programs into three divisions, changing the legislative and competitive structure (NCAA, 2012). Division I and Division II institutions have admission requirements set forth by the NCAA that students must obtain if they choose to participate in athletics. The NCAA, however, allows Division III institutions to enact their own admission policies. The NCAA (2012) website states, “Division III institutions hold student–athletes to the same overall standards for the institution in which the student–athlete is enrolling.” As a result, Division III institutions

must determine how to implement admission policies that allow teams to remain competitive without jeopardizing the academic integrity of the institution.

According to the NCAA, Division III student-athletes are obligated to meet specific admission criteria that mirrors that of the general student body. However, in the event that students do not qualify for general admission, many Division III institutions employ a special admit system, sometimes referred to as an athletic admit system to allow athletic departments to enroll student-athletes with lower high school academic scores (Laden, Matranga, & Peltier, 1999). This research project explored the irrationalities of a system that accepts and enrolls student-athletes with low scholastic aptitude test (SAT) scores and school grade point averages (GPAs), yet failed to provide the necessary academic support.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges that specially admitted student-athletes endure as they navigate their educational experiences. A qualitative case study approach was used to explore this phenomenon in depth within a particular context (described in more detail below), in order to understand both the “uniqueness and commonality” among participant experiences (Stake, 1995, p. 1). Fundamentally, the purpose of this research is refinement of understanding: “particularization, not generalization” (1995, p. 8) and takes the form of an instrumental case, meaning the specific context is of less importance to the nature of the study than the phenomenon itself (p. 64). The work described here was driven by two overarching research questions, intended to capture the phenomenon of interest:

1. What challenges do specially admitted student-athletes encounter as they navigate their academic experiences?
2. What support systems are in place to aid student-athletes as they enroll and advance toward graduation?

Bounding the Case

For the purposes of this research, the case study was bounded both by geographical location and institutional type. Rowan University is located in Glassboro, New Jersey, and was founded in 1923. Currently, Rowan offers over 85 undergraduate degrees in business, education, engineering, humanities and social sciences, math and science, and communication and creative arts. The Carnegie Classification for Rowan University is M4/R-Medium (four-year, large, primarily residential). Rowan employs about 1,300 employees and has an overall student population of 14,778. Roughly 5% of Rowan’s undergraduate students compete in the institution’s Division III varsity athletic programs, which offers eight sports for men and 10 for women.

The study was also bounded by the phenomenon. Annually, the Rowan University Athletic Department is permitted to specially admit about 50 student–athletes; however, not all of these students enroll. The students at the center of this research project are the quintessential Division III athletes, receiving no financial assistance for their athletic abilities (NCAA, 2014). Table 1 outlines the number and percentage of specially admitted student–athletes that graduated, are currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree, and failed to complete their degree at Rowan University.

Table 1

Graduation Standing of Specially Admitted Student–Athletes at Rowan University 2007–2011

Enrollment Year	Number of Students	Graduated in 4 years	Graduated in 5 years	Graduated in 6 years	Overall Graduation	Still pursuing	No longer enrolled (did not graduate)
2007	39	12 (31%)	8 (21%)	0 (0%)	20 (51%)	0 (0%)	19 (49%)
2008	24	8 (33%)	8 (33%)	3 (13%)	19 (79%)	0 (0%)	5 (21%)
2009	48	13 (27%)	9 (19%)	5 (10%)	26 (54%)	2 (4%)	20 (42%)
2010	45	19 (42%)	9 (20%)	0 (0%)	28 (62%)	2 (4%)	15 (33%)
2011	43	23 (53%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	24 (56%)	7 (16%)	12 (28%)
Overall	199	75 (39%)	35 (18%)	8 (4%)	117 (59%)	11 (6%)	71 (36%)

Note. Several of the specially admitted student–athletes in the 2009, 2010 and 2011 incoming classes are still pursuing a degree.

These data put into context the overall academic progress of each class (2007–2011) of specially admitted student–athletes. Of the 199 specially admitted student–athletes who enrolled, 117 of them have graduated, with an additional 11 still pursuing a degree. The four-year graduation rate from the population is 39%, while the overall graduation rate is 59% (with 6% still pursuing). Of the 199 who enrolled, 71 (36%) did not complete their degrees from Rowan. Many of the students who did not complete their degrees from Rowan left after being enrolled for one year or less. For example, of the 19 who did not graduate from the 2007 class, 11 left during their first year. This equates to over 28% of the 2007 special admit class leaving after being on campus for one year or less. These data paint a grim picture of the struggles of a population permitted to enroll with lower scores but not placed in a special program to ensure its success. Kuh (2005) writes, “after controlling for student background characteristics (such as ability and academic preparation), the student development research indicates that a key factor in student success is student engagement” (p. 87). Therefore, the issue of specially admitted student–athlete success is not an athletic department problem but rather

a wider Rowan University issue that revolves around student engagement and requires the concerted effort of multiple constituents.

Participants

This study examines specially admitted student-athletes and not those students-athletes that were accepted to Rowan University on their own academic merit. The NCAA (2012) admissions standards for participating Division II institutions require student-athletes to possess a minimum 820 SAT score and 2.0 cumulative high school GPA. These are also the minimum admissions criteria used at Rowan. Each team within the Athletic Department is allotted a certain number of special admits, based on the number of participants on the team. For example, the women's lacrosse team is allowed to use about two special admits a year, while the football team is permitted to use about 10. This study exclusively examines specially admitted student-athletes and those involved with the special admit system. It does not include student-athletes who met general admission requirements or students who participate in club or intramural sports. Participants were specially admitted at Rowan University because they failed to meet general admissions standards. The researchers interviewed 20 participants that included 12 specially admitted student-athletes and 8 athletic department members (coaches and athletic department personnel).

Of the specially admitted student-athletes who participated in the interviews, half ($N=6$) were male and half ($N=6$) were female. Of the participants interviewed, the majority were White/Caucasian ($N=7$) and Black/African American ($N=3$); of the remaining two, one was Latino and the other was American Indian. Each enrollment class (2007–2011) had at least one student-athlete interviewed, and the 2010 class ($N=4$) had the most.

Of the 12 student-athletes interviewed, seven are majoring in education; all seven are health and physical education majors. There were four students in majors in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, with three of the four enrolled in Law and Justice Studies. There was one student, a Biology major, listed in the College of Science and Mathematics. There were two students with GPAs of 2.0 or less and neither are currently enrolled or pursuing a degree at Rowan University.

As a result of the multifaceted work pertaining to student-athletes, a variety of athletic department personnel was selected. The athletic personnel interviews consisted of three head coaches, one assistant coach, admissions liaison to the athletic department, two advisors, and one administrator in a management position that has varying roles within the athletic department. The admissions liaison was selected because of his knowledge of the special admit process and his close relationship with the Athletic Department. Table 2 represents the demographic information of the interview sample.

Table 2*Demographic Information of the Interview Sample (N = 20)*

	N	%
Gender of specially admitted student–athletes		
Men (participating in a male sport)	6	50
Women (participating in a female sport)	6	50
Athletic Personnel		
Men’s Head Coach	2	25
Women’s Head Coach	1	13
Men’s Assistant Coach	1	13
Athletic Advisor	2	25
Admissions Liaison	1	13
Management	1	13

Note. At least one specially admitted student–athlete was interviewed from each incoming class (2007–2011). The 2010 incoming class had the most interviewed with four. The athletic personnel were selected because of their relationship with this population.

Data Collection

The primary means of data collection in this case study was interview. “Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others...the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Therefore, semi-structured, open-ended interviewing was used to explore the multiple realities of the specially admitted student–athlete. The researchers employed an intensity sampling technique for this phase of the study (Patton, 2002). This sampling technique allowed us to seek “excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not highly unusual cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 234). Student–athletes were selected to provide descriptive accounts of their experiences at Rowan University.

Also, coaches and administrators who work closely with student–athletes were interviewed. An intensity sampling technique was also used with this population to ascertain information that explains in great detail the many facets of the special admit program (Patton, 2002). Collecting data from the extreme or highly unusual cases was not a focal point in this research project. Interviewing this population allowed us to further our knowledge of the program and better understand the phenomenon. From this group of athletic personnel, we ascertained imperative information about strategies implemented to aid student–athletes as they navigate their educational experiences.

Data Analysis

Qualitative case study data analysis entails “a search for meaning” typically through the search for patterns (Stake, 1995, p. 78). In our search for patterns, we employed categorical aggregation as the overall analysis method, broken down

into two coding cycles. The *in vivo* method of coding was used during the first cycle of the qualitative case study analysis. Saldana (2009) writes that this method of coding “refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record” (p. 74). After transcribing each interview, *in vivo* coding was used to gather and preserve the language used by participants. *In vivo* coding helped to capture the perspectives of participants verbatim. This type of coding allowed for further analysis and is especially important for the second cycle of qualitative data analysis (Saldana, 2009). Although *in vivo* coding is sufficient for certain projects as the sole analysis method, the qualitative phase in this research project required a second cycle of coding.

Second cycle coding methods are “advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods” (Saldana, 2009, p. 149). Second cycle coding in this project was used to develop common and major themes from the data. Pattern coding allowed us to “pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (Saldana, 2009, p. 152). Throughout this cycle of coding, major themes were developed and expanded into what Stake refers to as “naturalistic generalizations” about the case. The findings highlight specific conclusions regarding our participant’s experiences and use their narratives to provide the reader a “vicarious experience” of the phenomenon at the heart of this study (Stake, 1995, pp. 85–86).

Findings

Student–athletes enroll in higher education to earn a degree; however, the mindset that participating in sports takes precedence over all other academically enriching activities has plagued many student–athletes. This athletics-first mentality is typically perceived for those at major Division I institutions; however, that mentality is also prevalent at the Division III level. This has the ability to impact the experiences of those transitioning from high school to college level academics.

Identity

An interesting reconceptualization became apparent during interviews with coaches, administrators, and students. The term *student–athlete* is often used to describe a population attending a particular institution while also playing a sport. This term gives the impression the person attending is a student first and an athlete second. However, that was not the case in this research project.

When asked about the greatest challenge, a football player stated, “My biggest challenge has been balancing my time between football and school. They say you are a student–athlete, but in actuality you’re really an athlete–student.” Of this, another student expressed, “Sometimes I would put going to the gym before finishing a paper or something. I should have set a goal to finish the paper first, but oftentimes would go to the gym instead.” When discussing the role of athletics, one

advisor stated, “Many times the sport is the driving force rather than the other way around.” This illuminates some of the structural deficiencies at Rowan University and answer why a student–athlete might feel like an athlete–student.

The athlete-first mentality was also shared by student–athletes, many of whom place precedence on athletics. It was a dilemma shared by several of the participants, For example, one third-year player explained:

Football is very important and even though the coaches say that being a student is more important, I feel like they hold football over being a student. Sometimes you feel like which one is a priority, like which one are you going to pick? Should I go out and practice, or should I study more?

Another student–athlete described her predicament and stated:

I’m not saying that running comes first, but some of my major courses are only offered at certain times of the year, and I keep putting it off and I think I might be falling behind. I am going to probably have to take summer classes to stay on pace to graduate.

The examples above provide insights into the moral dilemma of students torn between trying to satisfy their athletic and academic responsibilities associated with their student–athlete identity. According to Astin’s (1985) student involvement theory, students have a limited amount of time to partake in educationally related activities. As a result of time constraints, student–athletes have even less time to devote to academics.

From a university standpoint, this is problematic, especially when specially admitted student–athletes decide to discontinue participating in their sport. Their entire support system is rooted on an athletic foundation. In this research project, coaches were found to be cooperative in assisting specially admitted student–athletes, serving in a mentor role and supporting the student–athletes in a variety of ways. This support, however, is insufficient when tracking and monitoring the academic progress of student–athletes. When a student’s identity is grounded in athletics, failure, once the student stops participating, is imminent.

Student Engagement

This research project revealed two major issues regarding student engagement. First, student–athletes have hectic schedules that leave little time for campus involvement. Student–athletes do not have the same flexibility during the day because of athletic demands. Second, so much of student–athlete engagement revolves around programs designed by the coaching staffs of individual teams. Of the 12 student–athletes interviewed, only one discussed participating in a club or program outside of athletics. When asked about clubs and organizations, one cross country student explained, “I’m not, but I wish I was. I’m always interested in other things but with school and my sport, I really do not have any time to do anything else.” Student–athletes at Rowan University were very engaged, but only with activities associated with their respective teams.

Many of the coaches have established community service projects that connect student-athletes to the wider community. These projects included bone marrow drives, Relay for Life, sports clinics, Special Olympics events, toy drives, and assisting other teams' competitions. These projects provide an opportunity for Rowan's student-athletes to provide a service to the community, while also building team camaraderie. However, most of the participants in this study were only involved with athletic-related organizations and programs; this had the unintended effect of isolating them from the rest of the campus community. Without the proper programming for this unique population, that includes exposing this group of students to the various clubs, organizations, and resources, student-athletes at Rowan University will continue to not participate in the academically enriching programs being offered. Student engagement is a vital component for retention and student success (Kuh, 2005).

Student-athletes and athletic department members were asked a two-part question regarding student engagement and involvement. The first question asked student-athletes if playing a sport helped them feel like part of the Rowan University community, and the second asked about their involvement in clubs and organizations outside of athletics. Many of the players discussed an organic companionship that is developed amongst players. When student-athletes discussed getting involved they stressed how easy it is to make friends within their particular team. One female lacrosse player stated:

Being in a sport is like being in a fraternity or sorority. I really don't like that analogy, but it helps you coming in as a freshman knowing that you already have a group of friends that are going to be there for you. If you don't play a sport, you may not know anyone. When you come in as an athlete, you already know that the girls also love the sport.

Athletics at Rowan is very demanding and time-consuming, allowing little time for student-athletes to get involved in activities outside of their particular sport. This also has the potential to isolate student-athletes from the rest of the campus community. When discussing student-athlete involvement, one advisor stated:

I just don't think that athletics has been a big enough part of the student life here that it makes them (student-athletes) feel as much a part of student life as maybe it should. Sometimes athletics makes them feel isolated because they spend so much time concentrating on their sport. They sometimes don't have an opportunity to participate in other aspects of the community. So, here I am as a student-athlete and I'm expected to keep my grades up and I have study hall, lifting, practice, service projects, and watching other student-athletes. These requirements leave less time for participating in other events and clubs. In one regard they are very much a part of student life, but also very separated because of the demands of the sport.

Participating in athletics leaves little time for student–athletes to get involved in other clubs and organizations. Only one student–athlete interviewed discussed being involved in a club or activity outside of athletics. The one student stated she is involved with an educational program related to her major and they have a club that goes to some of the local school districts to mentor underserved youths. Student-involvement is vital for the successful completion of a college degree (Astin, 1985; Kuh, 1995; Tinto, 1975).

These student–athletes stated they were involved on campus, but when probed to describe the activities, participants only listed activities that their individual team is involved in. For example, a senior football listed three or four different projects that he was involved with, however each one pertained to programs established by the football coaching staff. When asked if he was in other clubs or organizations he stated, “No, not really. I consider football to be a club. It really took up so much time.”

For student–athletes whose time is limited, participating in outside clubs and organizations is challenging. The coaches are aware of the time constraints and try to incorporate meaningful activities within the program to encourage community engagement. However, because of time constraints, many student–athletes are not able to attend campus wide events and programs. This has the potential to be problematic from a university standpoint, because once a student–athlete stops participating in athletics, his or her connection to the wider campus is broken.

Tracking Progress

Most, if not all, special admit programs at Rowan University provide students with very specific resources and programming. Examples of the resources provided include summer preparation programs, academic advising, and mentorship programs. Within these programs, students are obligated to attend workshops, information sessions, and appointments with advisors and mentors. Many of these special admit programs have full-time staff to aid at-risk students.

The specially admitted student–athletes at Rowan University do not enter into a special program, and their academic progress is not tracked. Rowan University has not hired additional staff to track this at-risk population. Additionally, many of the coaches do not track their special admits. One women’s head coach stated:

For me, I really don’t track our special admits. I don’t even know who they are. I don’t pay them any more attention. I have a few that I need to watch carefully. I really think they need to feel success in one area to have a tie in, or they may not make it.

When asked about how special admits are tracked, a few of the coaches explicitly stated they hold them to the same academic standards as the rest of the team and provide no additional support.

As an institution, Rowan University does not have a plan in place to monitor these students or provide the additional support needed for so many. Although

there are similarities with how each coach handles academic issues pertaining to student-athletes, each one implements his/her own policies and procedures. One administrator explained, "All of our coaches are responsible for their student-athletes. They check their grades and provide study hall and tutoring." It is not prudent for the university to rely on head coaches to track this population and be responsible for providing academic support.

As students first, specially admitted student-athletes should have the necessary resources and programming to obtain a bachelor's degree at Rowan University; as athletes first they do not. If a specially admitted student-athlete decides to discontinue participating in athletics, there should be a plan in place to ensure the student, who enrolled with lower scores, is still closely monitored. One student that failed to complete his degree explained:

It would have been nice if someone would have followed up with me after I stopped playing. I felt like since I wasn't playing anymore, no one cared. I stopped going to class and no one checked in on me at all.

There are not the same resources for this population as they try to navigate higher education. Other specially admitted students enroll with the understanding that additional resources are needed to be successful. As such, this group of student-athletes is not provided additional services and relies on the coaching staff to assist with academic issues, again perpetuating the athlete-first mentality.

Coaches as Academic Advisors

At the Division I level, student-athletes have myriad academic resources, including tutors and advisors. These resources ensure that student-athletes are making satisfactory progress toward earning their degrees (NCAA, 2012). At the Division III level, those resources are not as readily available. One Rowan University advisor who has experience at the Division I level stated:

If you look at Division I institutions, they may have anywhere between 3 to 20 academic advisors (for athletics). They (student-athletes) have someone looking over them in the event that they don't go to class or aren't doing the things that they need to do.

Rowan University is a Division III institution and does not have advisors or tutors specifically assigned to work with student-athletes. As a result, the coaches are forced to serve multiple roles.

The coaches are an essential part of the academic success of student-athletes at Rowan University. Although they do not usually provide tutoring or direct academic advising, they are proficient at assisting students with their individual academic issues. One female lacrosse graduate stated, "My coach helped me a lot. She was very understanding. If we had issues with our schedule, she would help us work it out." Another student-athlete explained, "Our head coach helps with whatever. She graduated from here, so she knows everyone. If you are ever

struggling, she knows who to contact.” Coaches are an essential component in the student–athletes’ transition to college life and college academics.

All participants spoke highly of their head coaches and/or coaching staff, even the two who failed to complete their degrees at Rowan University. Half of the participants stated their head coaches were the first people they consulted when difficult academic issues emerged. They described positive relationships with their head coaches and stated it was very beneficial having someone constantly monitoring their academic progress. One student–athlete, when discussing her head coach, explained:

My head coach is literally the greatest man I’ve ever met in my life. I love him to death. He helps me with everything, either academic or sports based. Last year, we got a pair of throwing shoes and I ran threw them pretty quickly so he bought me a brand new pair out of his own pocket. Whatever I need, issues with teachers, everything. If any of his athletes have issues, he will discuss it with the athlete and then follow up with the professor. If they have a problem with scheduling or missing classes because of a meet, he will go right to the professor. He is very direct.

A few also stated that their coaches are frequently monitoring their academic progress and making sure they are going to class and doing their school work. A 2013 graduate that played football explained:

The coaches are on top of things. They know if you are not going to class. They know when you are struggling and they get on you. It was beneficial just being that you have someone looking over your shoulder and constantly pushing you.

Student–athletes are also fully aware that their coaches control playing time. If the coaches receive a negative report about one of their student–athletes, it could jeopardize the student–athlete’s playing time. The football graduate explained:

As a student–athlete, you love the sport you are playing and the coaches have the ability to take away playing time. You don’t want to mess up. Everyone wants to play. It helped me to be discipline with football and school work.

As a Division III institution, Rowan University does not have specific academic advisors assigned to student–athletes and relies on coaches to monitor and mentor students. As a result, each coach implements his/her own procedures for ensuring academic success from student–athletes. This is extremely problematic for those students who enroll and decide to stop participating in athletics, as a central piece of their support system is no longer available.

Discussion

The research is decisive regarding college students: The more involved and engaged they are, the greater the likelihood for academic success (Kuh, 2009; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Additionally, a more involved student is more likely to build lasting relationships, thus creating future career opportunities. So much of student-athletes' time and energy is dedicated to developing athletic ability, it often results in conflicting schedules with little time to explore other educational and social interests (Person & LeNoir, 1997; Watt & Moore, 2001). For many, the time constraints stymied the opportunity to excel off the field—in the classroom and on campus (Adler & Adler, 1985; Jolly, 2008). This complicated their college experience and adds to the challenges they endure, especially for specially admitted student-athletes who were not supported academically, thus suggesting that an athlete-student identity was more valued by the institution.

Student engagement is student and institution driven (Kuh, 2005). From an institutional standpoint, engagement means providing adequate support programs, academic advising, and enhanced on- and off-campus learning opportunities. The support programs should be student-centered and encourage personal growth, campus involvement, and leadership development (Schilling & Schilling, 2005). From the student perspective, engagement means actively participating in educationally related activities (Kuh, 2005). Yet, as a result of the athletic demands of participating at the college level, many student-athletes are unable to attend campus-wide events and join particular clubs and organizations. Add roughly 20 hours of practice, combined with weight training, film study, and team meetings, and athletic demands are closer to 30 hours (Holsendolph, 2008). Then factor in 12 to 16 hours of class time and 15 to 20 hours of studying, student-athletes have anywhere from 57 to 66 hours of obligations each week (Griffin, 2007). Student-athletes are challenged to find adequate time to explore academic interests, thus impacting their overall engagement in the college experience. For a student struggling academically, who may not have been college-ready, this has implications for their persistence and retention.

At Rowan University, specially admitted student-athletes are only permitted to enroll because of their athletic abilities. Unlike other special admit populations that receive guidance to ensure they are on a path to graduate, specially admitted student-athletes do not enroll into any distinctive program. Therefore, it is right to question if many of these students have been taken advantage of because of their athletic abilities and were never really on a path to graduate.

Unlike many at the Division I level, specially admitted student-athletes at Rowan who do not graduate are left with the additional burden of college loans. Repaying college loans without a college degree is an appalling scenario for so many who fail to complete their undergraduate degrees. When the proper support and guidance is provided, it is beneficial for the student-athlete and institution. The student-athlete is able to take advantage of the opportunity and graduate with a college degree that enables him/her to have a successful career.

Implications

This study has significant implications for research, practice, and policy. This section outlines those implications based on best practices and the finding of this research project.

Research

As a vulnerable and unprotected group, more must be done to understand and support Division III student athletes. A multiple case design to explore a variety of Division III institutions would elucidate best practices in addressing the challenges revealed in this study (Yin, 2003), by examining the programming used at numerous Division III institutions and evaluate how specially admitted student–athletes are supported in their academic endeavors. This type of study could have significant implications for a population that is in dire need of academic support.

In this project, the issues of gender and sport were not analyzed; however, it is perceived that certain groups are more successful than others. Therefore, we recommend a study that examines academic performance between gender and sport and includes the entire population of student–athletes at Rowan University and potentially other Division III institutions. The findings of which could begin a dialogue on how to better assist student–athletes at the Division III level.

Practice

Increased communication among departments could have significant implications for retention and graduation rates. One of the most profound statements in this research project came from a women’s head coach who succinctly stated, “When they are average or poor in both (academics and athletics), they usually struggle.” This statement is at the essence of this project, because it illuminates the structural deficiencies of the special admit system. Specially admitted student–athletes who struggle with athletics no longer have a support system to aid their academic progress. The coach no longer has a vested interest in their academic endeavors.

Increased lines of communication could better assist these students and provide the structure that is desperately needed. It is the responsibility of Rowan University to ensure the academic success of all students. With increased communication, members of the athletic and advising departments could collaborate to handle student–athletes struggling in either athletics or academics. This would allow for each to assess the situation and provide the necessary resources.

Policy

The implications of this research project regarding policy are essential for establishing a fair and ethical system that is in the best interests of the student–athlete. To determine eligibility, the NCAA uses a sliding scale that involves the student–athlete’s high school GPA and SAT score. The sliding scale system is used at the Division I level, while student–athletes need an 820 SAT score and 2.0 GPA

to enroll at the Division II level (NCAA, 2010). However, at the Division III level, admission standards are ambiguous and poorly defined.

Without enrollment standards for Division III athletics, individual institutions are permitted to employ their own admission standards. The NCAA (2014) website states, "Division III features student-athletes who are subject to the same admission standards, academic standards, housing, and support services as the general student body." This statement is contradictory to how it is applied and implemented; Rowan University is not the only Division III institution employing a special admit system. A poorly defined system has forced Division III institutions to create their own admissions criteria. It would be prudent for the NCAA to craft a uniform enrollment policy for all Division III institutions. A policy would ensure minimum guidelines for students seeking to participate at this level.

At the Division I level, student-athletes earn athletic scholarships, thus limiting the need for student loans. However, at the Division III level, students are not afforded athletic scholarships and must pay for their education. As such, many student-athletes at the Division III level need student loans to pay for college. What is the long-term impact of not completing a degree and having student loans? These students not only have student debt, but also do not have a degree, thus limiting their career opportunities. Is the NCAA culpable in allowing underprepared student-athletes to enroll without providing support systems?

Conclusion

At its core, college athletics is an enormous opportunity for student-athletes to participate in sports, while earning a degree. The student's athletic abilities have paved the way for an opportunity to attend college; without it, that opportunity may not have been present. Issues arise when institutions are only concerned with athletic performance and not academic performance. The question for colleges should be, "Are we implementing policies to ensure that student-athletes are on a path to earning degrees?"

Specially admitted student-athletes are a vulnerable population granted a special admit to enroll at Rowan University because of their athletic abilities. Although they failed to meet the general admission requirements, their coaches believed they possessed the skills necessary to improve the team, which is why the special admit was granted. This study produced evidence that without the proper programming and support, specially admitted student-athletes at Rowan University will continue to struggle in their academic endeavors. This study has significant implications for the way student-athletes at the Division III level should be supported. From an advocacy perspective, it is unjust to continue to exploit these students for their athletic prowess and ignore their academic needs.

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