

PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETIC EXPERIENCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM NCAA DIVISION I AND DIVISION III

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ABSTRACT

Although the structure of intercollegiate athletics has been critiqued virtually since its inception, little is known about how that structure influences student-athletes' experiences. Differences between a business model (producing mass-scale, revenue-generating programs) and an educational model (operating athletics as a student service) were assessed by interviewing graduating senior male basketball and football players (N=14) from an NCAA Division I University and an NCAA Division III College. Results indicate differences including (a) time commitment, (b) motivation to participate, (c) role conflict/complementarity, (d) perceived attitudes of coaches, and (e) the role of athletics in the college experience. Findings are discussed with respect to recent rule changes and current advocacy in intercollegiate athletic programs. Implications for athletic academic counselors are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

I don't know why people question the academic training of a student-athlete. Half of the doctors in the country graduated in the bottom half of their class.

*--Al McGuire, former basketball coach at
Marquette University*

Smith (1985) discussed an historic amateur/professional dilemma in college sport that calls for a choice between two equally undesirable alternatives. If a college has truly amateur sport, it will lose prestige (and perhaps money) as it loses games. If a college admits to being professional, it will lose its respectability as an academic institution. According to Smith (1985), the unacceptable decision has been to claim amateurism to the world, while accepting a professional mode of operation.

The degree to which institutions embrace amateur or professional models will influence the experiences of student-athletes who participate in these programs. Although intercollegiate sport can facilitate the goals of higher education, it can also have independent or conflicting goals. The present study sought to assess the perceptions of student-athletes who participated in programs that followed two divergent models of intercollegiate athletics: the "educational" and "business" models.

Descriptions of the Educational and Business Models

An educational model structures intercollegiate athletics as a student service. There are nominal or no admission fees for athletic events. Athletics are supported by the general operating budget; there are no athletic "scholarships" (or grants-in-aid), special considerations, or special services for athletes. Coaches often have positions as professors, and athletics are viewed as a complement to the academic program.

In a business model, intercollegiate athletics may be structured under the finance department or could be governed by an athletic department that is separate from the university. There are substantial admissions prices, particularly for men's basketball and football. Most athletic programs under the business model are expected to be self-supporting and must prioritize income generation. Athletic "scholarships" are awarded, and athletes receive special considerations and services. Coaches are generally committed full-time to the athletics program. Athletics exist more as an "end," with few, if any, ties to the academic program. When the purpose of the program is to provide entertainment and to generate revenue, it necessarily assumes a business model in which providing educational experiences for student-athletes is secondary. Although there is not complete congruence between models and divisions, for the purposes of simplicity the educational model will be associated with NCAA Division III (Div3) and the business model will be associated with NCAA Division I (Div1).

PURPOSE

This study can be seen as having both phenomenological and hermeneutic intentions. In all respects the focus is to understand the various meanings of intercollegiate athletic experiences. It is phenomenological in its efforts to describe experiences lived by student-athletes. The study fits within

psychosocial hermeneutics in that "the aim of the inquiry is to expose distortions in the meaning of existing psychosocial conditions and implicit assumptions that otherwise limit freedom (Held, 1980; Howard, 1982; McCarthy, 1978)" (Fahlberg & Fahlberg, 1994, p. 105).

METHOD

Participants

For the purposes of this study, the population of student-athletes was limited to male basketball and football players who had completed their collegiate careers (generally graduating seniors). These athletes were selected in an effort to contrast the business and educational models of intercollegiate athletics and because it seemed that they would be best able to reflect upon their overall experiences. The great visibility of men's basketball and football programs and their extreme business orientation at the Division IA level were the basis for this limitation.

Selection of Schools. In an effort to represent the business and educational models of intercollegiate athletics, two institutions of higher learning were selected. The primary concern was to select schools that most closely approximated the models in question, one in Division I and one in Division III. Each of the schools selected had men's basketball and football teams that won their conference and/or participated in national post-season competition during the careers of the student-athletes who were interviewed. The intent of this decision was to examine the experiences of individuals who shared similar levels of competitive success within their respective divisions.

Selection of Student-Athletes. After obtaining permission from the athletic departments and obtaining a list of individuals who met the criteria, all potential participants were contacted by telephone. Appointments were made with all those who were available and willing to participate in the study. Several student-athletes were unavailable for a variety of reasons. Some were off-campus or had graduated. Several of the football players from the Division I school were attending National Football League camps or tryouts. At the Division III institution, of a total of 19 student-athletes meeting the criteria, eight were available and agreed to be interviewed. One of those eight dropped out for reasons unrelated to the study. At the other institution, of a total of 26 student-athletes meeting the criteria, ten agreed to be interviewed. Three of those 10 did not have sufficient involvement to be included in the study. As a result, the total number of participants was 14.

Interview Protocol

The interviews were conducted in private rooms in libraries, offices, or individuals' apartments. An interview schedule was used to organize questions. Two microcassette recorders were used to tape the interviews, and the

interviews were transcribed verbatim. The following is an outline of the interview topics but not the actual questions:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Explanation of research/interview
 - B. Collection of demographic/personal data
- II. Time commitment to athletics
 - A. Number of hours per week spent in athletics
- III. Participation motivation
 - A. Choice of college - importance of athletics
 - B. Scholarship?
 - C. Changes over four years
 - D. Athletics ever become like a job?
- IV. The student-athlete role
 - A. Roles complementary/conflicting?
 - B. Have classes/academics been missed for athletics?
 - 1. Professors' reactions
 - C. Have athletics been missed for classes/academics?
 - 1. Coaches/teammates' reactions
 - D. Athletics' influence on time for academics/studies
 - 1. How dealt with
 - 2. Academic support/tutoring
 - E. What has been learned from athletic experience?
- V. Coaches' interest in athlete
 - A. As performer
 - B. As student
 - C. Priorities
 - D. Attitude toward academics
- VI. Role of athletics in college experience
 - A. How enhanced
 - B. How deterred
 - C. Perceived effect on academic performance

ANALYSIS

Verbatim transcripts from the interviews were subjected to initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser, 1978) and inductive analyses. The topic areas from the interview schedule served as an organizing framework. Initial analysis of the interview data led to the construction of codes that were then applied to the entire data set. For example, the code "pro" was used to denote student-athletes' references to potential careers in professional sports. Once this code was deemed relevant, the entire data set was searched for related material. The coding and analysis process resulted in five major themes: (a) time commitment, (b) participation motivation, (c) role conflict/complementarity, (d) perceived attitudes of coaches, and (e) the role of athletics in the college experience.

RESULTS

Student-athletes from both the Division I and the Division III institution reflected on their experiences during their collegiate careers. Their comments revealed differences with respect to several factors. In each case, the influence of the model of intercollegiate athletics can be seen under the five major themes.

Time Commitment to Athletics

Recent changes in NCAA rules can be seen as a response to long-term commentary on the amount of time student-athletes have invested in the athletic roles. As an example, Coakley (1982) commented in the following way:

The excessive time, energy, and mental commitment associated with the role of athlete often creates . . . intense role conflict. . . . The pressure to win and to attract spectators requires commitment on the part of athletes that can seriously interfere with the commitment necessary to be a good student. (p. 143)

In the past, NCAA Division I football players often spent 45-49 hours per week during the season preparing for, participating in, and recovering from football. With travel, the figure rises to over 60 hours per week. Basketball players have spent 35-40 hours per week with travel escalating the figures to over 50 hours per week (Underwood, 1980). Recent investigations and players' reports suggested that these figures underestimate the actual time being committed. It is striking when one considers that student-athletes are meeting their athletic obligation while the NCAA rules require full-time academic loads.

In each model of the current study, football players spent much more time in athletics than did their peers in other sports. The number of hours per week for Div3 was three-quarters to one-half the number for Div1. More significant were the student-athletes' perceptions of time commitment. Div3's uniformly felt that their time in athletics was reasonable. They made the following comments: "I quit lifting to give me more time for academics." "Practice never seems to be too long." "They make sure especially here that school comes first. You have time to balance both school and athletics. I really have no complaint about the amount of time."

Div3 student-athletes tended to put in less "extra time" in meetings, film viewing, weight lifting, and travel, and they missed fewer classes. Div1's, who reported they put in roughly six to nine hours per day in football, had mixed emotions about their time commitment. Several felt the time demands were unreasonable. Some felt the time was reasonable and justifiable if you want to be the best and win. One Div1 perceived that he was putting in 12 hours a day on football; however, further analysis of his comments suggested it was closer to 8 hours a day. He had this to say when asked if his time commitment was reasonable:

No. I don't think so. It's too much time, but I guess that's college life and that's what you have to deal with for college football, because it's a business, a lot of politics in it and everything. It's all business, so you really have to, you know, put your mind to it, so, I don't like it, but I guess that's what you have to do.

Another Div I made this comment:

It was like, it felt like too much, you just felt like you were being drowned. . . . In football, it's almost like you're being brainwashed that that's why you're here, 'cause you're told, like that's kind of the over[riding message], what shadows you, on your shoulders—you're here for football and don't forget that. I mean it may not be said straight out, but it's implied in every aspect of living in the university. Here at [this particular] university, so it's almost like you feel obligated to any and everything you can to maintain your conditioning, your status as a football player. . . .

Either after discussing their time commitment or at some other point in the interview, student-athletes were asked if their athletic participation ever felt like a job. Virtually every student-athlete from both models responded affirmatively. There was a difference, however, in the reasons for that feeling and the degree to which that perception was held. One Div3 said that it was like a job when they had meetings at night, which occurred once or twice a week. Another said yes because it was a routine to go to classes and then go to practice, as it might be to go to an afternoon job. Several Div1's had similar sentiments; one expressed the extreme to which athletics could be a job:

Oh yes, that's what it is. It's a job. It's really a job. An eight-hour job, straight through. . . .but we spend more time than eight hours on football and academics. It's all a job. It's a big-time job. I mean if we don't win, if we don't do good, the coaches don't do good. They might get fired. So we have to do good; the coaches have to do good coaching us. It's all in a line.

Participation Motivation

All the student-athletes were asked how they made their choice of college and the importance of athletics in the decision. The general trend of their reasons is reflected in the following comments. A Div3 said, "To tell you the truth, [athletics] didn't really have that much importance as just wanting a good school to study at. . . ." A Div1 commented, "I thought about going to school just for academics, but somehow to make it as a pro. . . .I wanted to play in front of 15,000 people. So basketball was the biggest part of the choosing."

Scholarships and Motivational Changes over Four Years

Another factor investigated during the interviews was changes in motivation to participate in athletics. One area of interest was the effect of a scholarship on motivation. Ryan (1977, 1980) has indicated that student-athletes who receive athletic scholarships tend to exhibit a decrease in intrinsic motivation over their college years. Although no clear support for this contention was found, there were some interesting differences between scholarship (Div1) and non-scholarship (Div3) athletes.

The Div3's reported no significant changes in reasons for participation. Their comments focused on playing for the enjoyment and challenge of the sport as well as social ties with team members. It was suggested that with no scholarships, "you only get the guys who really want to play." One Div3 commented that as playing time and pressure increase, the excitement of playing wanes.

The Div1's, on the other hand, expressed changes in motivations during their college years. These changes took them in two interesting and different directions. The less common shift was expressed by a basketball player who found himself putting less effort into academics and focusing more on his sport; he said that he "became more materialistic" as he saw the opportunity to play professionally. The majority of Div1's, who tended to select their school or chose to attend college largely because of athletics, found that their interest in academics tended to increase during their college years. One football player exemplified the attitude that was expressed by several of his peers:

School became a lot more important to me and that, by your junior year you pretty much realize what football's done to you. . . 'cause you see people who have gone, and the reality of not everybody goes on to the next level starts to sink in and. . . you see yourself, and you see someone who you thought was a superstar go out and not even come close and. . . that puts a perspective on yourself. Of course, you may feel that you're better than that person and you may have a shot, but you also say that guy was good. He had a great career here on the college level and he didn't go anywhere—why is that? And you see them struggle, try to finish school, trying to get a job or are just still chasing the dream of the next level. . . .

Role Conflict/Complementarity

A primary concern of this research was to analyze how the two models affect the experience of the student-athletes. A major component of this effect is the perception of how the roles of student and athlete conflict with or complement each other. One assessment of how the two roles worked together

is the perceived effect of athletic participation on academic performance. The comments made by the Div1's support the argument that a business model of intercollegiate athletics is incongruent with the stated mission of higher education. Div3's stated that athletics do make considerable demands upon their time but do not create conflict. Most found that athletic participation had a positive effect on their academic performance. Several said that it was easier to study during the season. One found, "I had a higher GPA during football." This observation is in accord with Robinson's (1988) examination of the NCAA that reported "in the lower divisions, in which sports are more integrated into other aspects of college life, athletes tend to perform better academically than the student body as a whole" (p. 120).

The Div1's statements reflected profoundly different experiences. Even with special tutors and academic support services, the role conflict was seen as much greater and athletic participation was generally acknowledged to have a negative effect on academic performance. One Div1 said, "I would never miss athletics for academics. . . Finding a balance was the hardest thing." Another stated, "I was always more football-oriented than school. . . You sacrifice your school for athletics." One football player described his experience of trying to be a student and an athlete:

Yeah, it's hard, because it's easy not to be a student. I know a lot of athletes, even me, you come here to play football. . . because if you didn't get a scholarship you wouldn't be at this college. So it's hard to be a student, but you know you have to be a student if you want to stay eligible and do good, but I'm graduating. . . and that was. . . important to get my degree, 'cause there's only so many people who go play pro football.

Most Div1's had trouble finding a balance, and they felt their classroom performance suffered because of athletics. One Div1 said, "I think I would have got better grades, a lot better grades if I wouldn't have played football." Another talked about problems with taking challenging courses during the season: "I tried to take a computer class during the fall once and it just didn't work. So I saved all those. I took those in the summer or in the spring. That's how I did it. Some people can, depending on your major, you can do certain things. . . I felt that I could do better. You can look at my grade point and see it suffered a lot during the fall, definitely."

Perceived Attitudes Of Coaches

Whereas athletes' performances may be seen as a reflection of the coaches, the coaches play a central role in constructing the student-athletes' collegiate experiences. Although the participants observed a very limited number of coaches, their observations may support what might be expected about coaches in the two models. One Div3 said of his basketball coach, "He looks at us as student-athletes, in that order. He really stresses academics

before anything.” Another said his football coach “really stresses being a student a lot; he . . . looks at you more as a person before he does an athlete.” A third said his football coaches are “really pushing academics. I’m sure Coach [X] pushes academics, but I’m sure that’s the way he really feels inside. They go out of their way—way, way overboard to stress that this is Division III and you’re first a gentleman, then you’re a student, then you’re an athlete in that order. He seems to really believe that and seems to think that’s the way it should be. . . . I don’t have any complaints about that. I think they do take a backseat role to academics.”

Div1’s tended to suggest that their coaches saw them as performers first. One remarked, “The coach wants you to do your best in athletics first.” Coaches in the business model were seen as emphasizing the importance of athletics, and their concern with academics was primarily eligibility and working toward a degree. A few individuals stated that coaches are taking a growing interest in academic achievement and graduation rates as these issues receive more media attention.

The Role of Athletics in the College Experience

On the Bright Side. Each student-athlete was asked, in an effort to get the “bottom-line,” if he felt that his athletic experience had enhanced or detracted from his college experiences. With one exception, the student-athletes reported that athletics had, in fact, enhanced their collegiate careers. There were, however, some noteworthy differences between the two models. The Div3’s were more purely and enthusiastically positive, whereas the Div1’s tended to express a generally positive experience with some significant drawbacks. The following comments illustrate this interpretation.

One Div3, when asked if his college experience were enhanced by athletics said, “Yeah, ten times, I’ve seen. . . in four years here. . . more places than I’ve been in my whole life before that. . . . It’s only been positive. . . . It’s been fun. I wish I had four more years.” Another remarked, “I don’t have a negative feeling about basketball in the sense that it’s totally enhanced my four years here. I think without it, I would have left [my] college with something missing. I learned a lot from the academic part of it, but basketball, the sports part of it. . . gave me a whole different outlook and added to that experience in education. . . . I wouldn’t have traded it for anything.”

The Div1’s had positive feelings about their overall experiences: “Football has enhanced my college career in its own special way. . . . It’s enhanced my character and when I look back at these times and the guys that I’ve played with and everything. I really love the guys and it’s enhanced it in that way. It’s been an overall good experience.” Yet, they felt that there were drawbacks not mentioned by their Division III counterparts, such as time taken away from school, the difficulty of the training, the loss of privacy, and the inability “to be seen as just another classmate.”

The Business of Sport: Student-Athletes' Views

As can be witnessed in the interview schedule, there were no attempts during the interview to elicit any comments about intercollegiate athletics as a business or the NCAA as a cartel. There were, however, some interesting remarks that are quite germane to issues raised by the relevant literature. Many of the Div1's felt like they were involved in a big business, and several seemed to feel that they had been exploited. One student-athlete talked about the business nature of football and its effects:

Here there's a lot of big money; that's basically what it is, is money. . . .That's all it is; it's a huge business. We're free, we're free athletes, I guess. Scholarships, that's nothing, how much money do we make for the college?. . . It's [the coaches'] job to make sure that [the university] has a winning team, no matter how it gets done, so if we have to do extra stuff, they don't care as long as we win. . . .I don't think it's fair, but that's the way the system is, but you really can't change the system like this. It'd be tough.

Another football player discussed his frustrations with the NCAA:

But the biggest thing is the NCAA. I think they're kind of screwed up; after college that's my biggest thing I realize. The NCAA kind of screws everything up, I think. . . .They're not in the best interests of the athlete; they're in the best interest of themselves. . . .So I don't think the NCAA does anything. I think it's a big joke, but they're making a lot of money somehow. They say we really care about the players, then why don't they outlaw astroturf?. . .If the NCAA really cared, they'd do something about it.

A major resulting factor of the business model is the tremendous emphasis on winning. A football player described his perspective on the subject:

Winning is what you play for. Winning is what you do all this for. That's why you do it, to win. I mean there's a lot, in football, of extra stuff you have to do all the time, and the only reason you do it is for Saturday so you can go out and play and win. That's the only reason you do it.

DISCUSSION

This attitude reflects what Schmitz (1968) called "the exaggeration of the importance of victory . . . [one of] the abuses which can kill the spirit of play within sport and reduce sport to something less than its fullest human possibilities" (p. 27). All that is bad about the zero-sum paradigm of sport is highlighted with the introduction of a business model. Winning, in addition to

whatever intrinsic satisfaction it may bring, carries with it economic gain. When an athletic department is asked to support itself, its survival comes to depend on winning programs in sports that can generate substantial revenue. Just as hunger supplants intellectual pursuits, educational goals are subjugated when survival is predicated on victory.

Yet victory "in sports is not absolute, and it should not be allowed to behave like an absolute. The policy of winning at all costs is the surest way of snuffing out the spirit of play in sport. The fallout of such a policy is the dreary succession of firings in college and professional sport" (Schmitz, 1968, p. 27) which have only increased in the past decades. In addition, such beliefs lead to dealing with a distorted form of sport. To focus on the product of sport is to neglect the process. By focusing on the process of the sport experience, athletic programs can be better equipped to be of educational value to participants.

The central tension surrounding the business model has been between amateurism and its loss of prestige, professionalism, and respect. The unacceptable solution has been to espouse values of education while operating in a business mode. Institutions of higher learning should not be depending on business-oriented intercollegiate athletics for prestige.

Part of the difficulty rests with the fact that "the nexus of economic relations between consumer and educational institutions [today] resembles the exchange of consumer goods in a market economy where the demand functions dominate, both qualitatively and quantitatively" (Botstein, 1983, p. 23).

IMPLICATIONS FOR ATHLETIC ACADEMIC COUNSELORS

For those individuals who have been involved with counseling student-athletes, many of the comments above are probably familiar. What is interesting to note, however, is the relation between the type and quality of student-athletes' experiences and the model of intercollegiate athletics under which they participated. Fortunately, recent rule changes within the NCAA (e.g., restrictions on time commitment) may mitigate some of the negative aspects of what Div I's tended to report. It remains important, however, to continue to question the appropriateness of sport as a business on our campuses.

As concerned professionals, athletic academic counselors can heighten awareness about the pressures placed on student-athletes when they are put in the position of being entertainers in revenue-producing ventures. The present study indicates that when student-athletes participate in programs that operate under a business model, the overall quality of their experiences declines. The student-athletes' perceptions discussed above reveal that by maintaining intercollegiate athletics within the context of the goals of higher education, they have a more positive, balanced college experience. Although counselors can do a great deal to help student-athletes to cope with the stresses they face in their dual roles, those professionals can also reduce the challenges by working to shift programs toward more educational models.

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